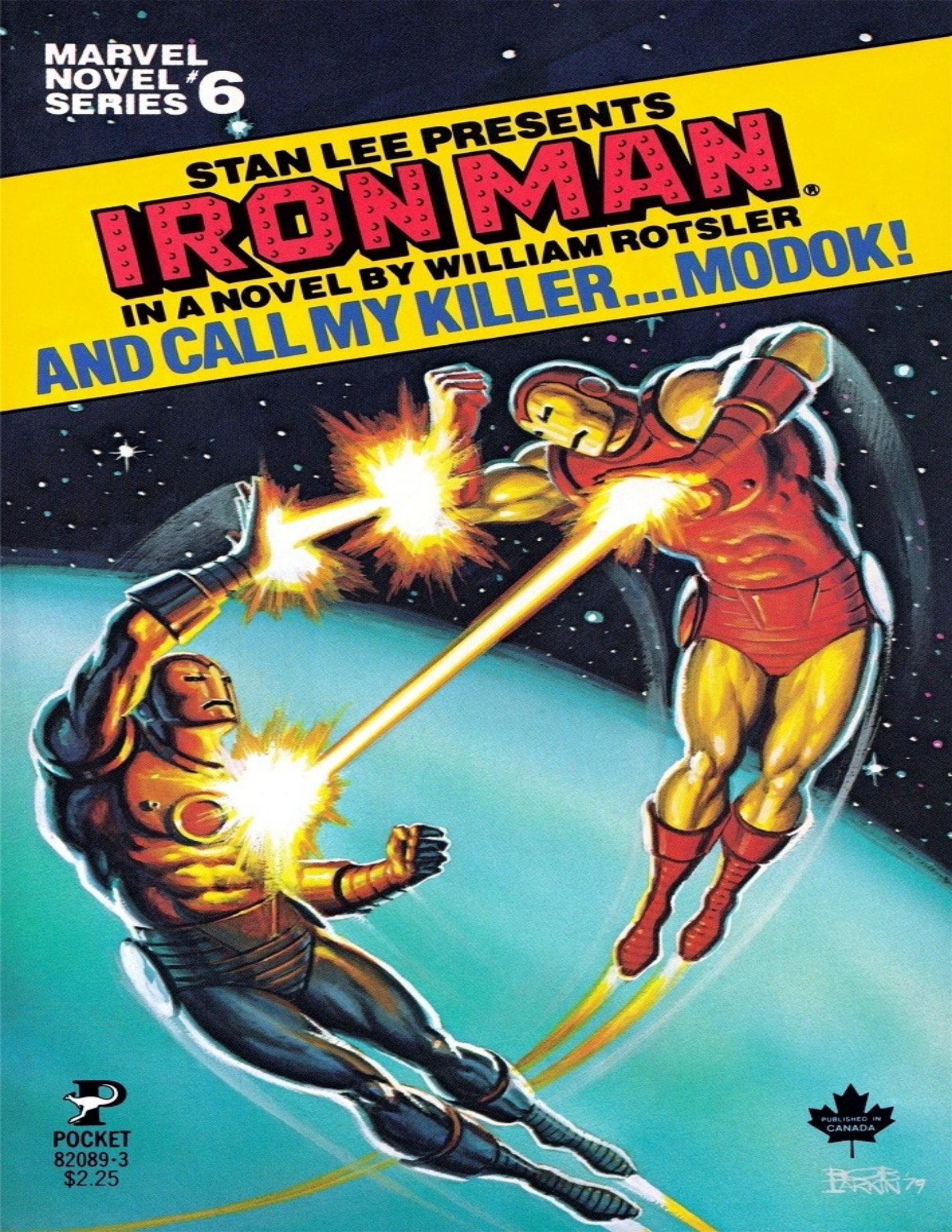
MARVEL NOVEL SERIES #6

STAN LEE PRESENTS

IRON MAN®

IN A NOVEL BY WILLIAM ROTSLER

AND CALL MY KILLER....MODOK!



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MECHANIZED MAYHEM!

When millionaire industrialist Tony Stark first created the solar-charged steel-mesh armor he wears to become the Invincible **IRON MAN,** it was designed to support his damaged heart and save his very life!

But now, a helpless victim of the international crime cartel called A.I.M., Stark is forced to create a suit of armor even mightier than his own . . . a suit of armor expressly designed to destroy the Invincible

IRON MAN

AND CALL MY KILLER . . . MODOK!

A sinister, deadly game of chess between the powers of good and evil, where all the rules keep changing . . . and nothing is ever as it appears!

AN INSTANT COLLECTOR'S ITEM: THE ARMORED AVENGER IN HIS FIRST FULL-LENGTH NOVEL!

**“THE GAS DID NOT WORK,”
SOLOMON SAID, TREMBLING.**

“Exactly,” Modok said. “As you have seen, nothing sent against this armor has been effective. The suit is nearly impregnable. You could use it in fires—oil fires, for example. No troops could stand against it. A company of trained, loyal troops equipped like this—” he paused as Iron Man blasted the plastic shield again, splashing raw energy across the shiny face, creating still more, still deeper fractures, “—could conquer, control and monitor any area, against any enemy.”

AND CALL MY KILLER . . . MODOK!

BY WILLIAM ROTSLER

Packaged and edited by Len Wein and Marv Wolfman

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P.V.S EBOOK

Printed in Canada

For Len Wein and Marv Wolfman,
who showed us comic fandom

One

The opening move in the chess game was made with pawns —living pawns.

The troop-carrying flier came up over the trees fringing the southern edge of Benford University's brick-and-ivy campus. Book-carrying students blinked and gawked as the landing gear of the machine unfolded from its metal belly.

"Those guys in Engineering are getting crazier every semester," grumbled an English major. "Look at them. They're going to set that weird crate right down in the sculpture garden!"

An art major next to him gulped. "I . . . I don't think those guys are from Engineering, Al. They . . . they have guns."

"I thought we phased out the ROTC," Al said. "Hey, look, they're aiming right at us! Hey, you guys, be careful there —!"

Al looked down the barrel of a strange weapon as the sides of the flier dropped open and the yellow-clad troops jumped out. They wore strange helmets that covered their

entire heads, with only a mesh-covered slit across the eyes. The weapons in their hands did not look like rifles. The weapon pointed at Al did not have a hole in the barrel; instead, there was a circular grid. The grid glowed, flashing briefly. Everything slowed for Al and his companion; their minds seemed to stop. They crumpled to the walk, their books spilling from their hands. Al badly bruised his face against the cement, but it was his only injury. He was not dead; he was sleeping.

“All right,” one of the yellow-clad invaders snarled, sweeping a gloved-hand toward the north. “You know what to do—move it!”

A group of young women turned the corner of the Chemistry Building and stopped, staring at the sight of twenty strangely dressed and weirdly armed figures running toward them. Beyond was a metal ship of some sort, flat backed and beetlelike, sitting in the sculpture garden on four landing pads.

“Great Gauguin, *that* isn’t the new acquisition, is it?” asked one of the art majors. Before anyone had time to answer, two of the leading invaders leveled their strange weapons. The grids flashed, sending ionized alpha waves into their brains. The alpha waves neutralized the natural brain-wave functions. The women fell in a heap as the invisible beams played over them.

The yellow-clad figures ran past them without even a glance at the exposed legs and revealed underwear, where there was any to reveal. Only one man was left and he stood behind a mounted weapon in a ring in the rear of the invaders’ ship. His hands were on the grips of the gleaming weapon. He watched impassively as the breeze flipped the white pages of spilled books and ruffled the short skirts of the sleeping students.

“But technology got us *into* this mess!” the bearded young student protested from the rear of the auditorium.

“And it will take technology to get us out,” Tony Stark replied. He held the mike in his hand and paced the lecture stage, looking up at the steeply ranked seats, each filled with a Benford University student. “It is true, as Simon Ramo said, that the world is a paradox of technological progressiveness and social primitivism. But rejecting technology will not get us out of this mess we’re in. It was rejecting a full technological synthesis that got us *into* it . . . Yes?” He indicated another student, a young woman, at the right side.

“Mister Stark, you are the motivating force behind one of the biggest technological concerns in the world, Stark International, and you are here talking to us about the great advances in *ecological* technology. Yet your whole business was founded in war. You were a major supplier of war machinery!” She sounded bitter, yet puzzled.

“That’s true,” Stark said. “War—any war, anywhere, anytime—always gives impetus to technological advancement. It may just result in a better shield or a better way to tie your whacking rock to a club, but war *does* advance technology. That is *why* Stark International now has the know-how to wage war on pollution, to *help* with that technology born in war.”

Before he took another question, Stark strode across the stage in thought, ignoring the many hands that were raised. Then he stopped and turned toward his audience. “There was a time on this planet—and it was not very long ago—when the seas seemed limitless and the skies vast enough to hide the mistakes of mankind. The world was a big place and men could afford to be small. But now the world is small—and men must be big.”

“Sounds like you got religion,” sneered one student in the second row. “Now that you’re rich.”

“It is never too late to admit your mistakes,” Stark said with a smile. More than one female student felt a little bump in her heart as she watched the handsome, dark-haired Stark. He *was* a little old, they thought, into his thirties certainly, but sometimes an older man could be *very* interesting. Especially a *rich* older man, one with an international reputation as a playboy.

“Have you heard Barry Commoner’s ‘Four Laws of Ecology’?” Stark asked. Several students shook their heads and Stark continued. “One: ‘everything is connected to everything else.’ Two: ‘everything must go somewhere.’ Three: ‘nature knows best’ Four: ‘There is no such thing as a free lunch.’ ”

There was some laughter but the student at the back who had asked the first question called out, “And *you’re* going to save us?”

“At a price!” another student challenged.

“No, I’m not going to save you. *We’re* going to save *us.* You and me and anyone else that’s interested. This *is* Spaceship Earth. We have no other planet to escape to. Stark International has a multifold plan.” He held up one finger. “One: to combat technological flaws by technological —and *legal*—means. Two: to help establish colonies in space —commonly called O’Neill colonies—and to help them become self-sufficient as swiftly as possible, in order to establish an outpost of man—independent of whatever may happen here—so that *someone* will survive. Three: Stark International will do whatever it can to increase food production and solar energy use, to—”

“To make more money for Tony Stark!” someone jeered.

“Look,” Stark said seriously, “knowledge will never replace respect when it comes to ecology, but knowledge might give us the tools to help.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony saw the grim face of Happy Hogan, arms folded, looking dourly at the young audience. Happy was Stark's combination chauffeur and bodyguard, and one of the few people in the world who was privy to the secret that was center-most in Tony Stark's life: that Stark was Iron Man.

"Money can help," Tony said, "but money is not always necessary. Having to solve problems *without* funding usually results in people using their heads instead of their pocketbooks. That way they find *creative* ways to use what we already have, to use nature itself. Money usually makes us lazy, and in the end we pay for our laziness and have second-class solutions to first-class problems."

There was a short silence as the students digested his words. They had come partially simply to view—and judge—the famous playboy and industrialist, friend of Iron Man and Captain America and the other legendary figures. But now they were unconsciously judging themselves and their society.

"Aw, you just want to pick our minds," someone called out.

Stark smiled and ran a fingertip over his dapper mustache. "I was hoping to recruit some of you, actually. To give you jobs at SI. Not all of you, but the best of you. The ones that are not afraid of commitment, of paying dues for living here and now. I'm looking for bright young minds with bright new ideas. Minds that are not cast in cement, minds that can see new solutions where others see only problems."

The young man at the back of the auditorium was reassessing Stark. The legendary figure had always seemed to be cold, a man with a stainless-steel heart, an executive with a cash register where his brain should be. But unless he was snowing them, he was sounding good. The student could feel it in the air, in the murmurs and the stirring

around him. The young man knew that no one built a multimillion-dollar empire without having vast business acumen as well as technical genius. But what the people seemed to know best was Stark-the-playboy, the different-woman-every-night chauvinist, the big spender, the jet-setter.

“Aw, the only reason you’re into this ecology thing,” someone said, “is that Viet Nam is no longer a market for your munitions and war machines.”

“Wrong,” Stark said at once. “I work where I think my country needs me most. It was conducting a war; I felt obliged to help. It is *still* waging war—against pollution, and against those who would pervert it, destroy our freedoms—”

“Oh, the old Commie-menace crap,” someone said.

“No,” Stark replied. “Yes, that, too, but that sort of thing is in the province of the President, the State Department and the Defense Department. There are others, powerful and evil, who have designs upon our richness, our great country, who want to—”

“Aw, come *on,* Stark,” someone shouted. “You’re getting paranoid in your old age! Secret plots! Evil villains! Do you look under your bed every night?”

There was laughter and Stark waited it out, looking relaxed and debonair. He’d heard it before, at other college campuses, at business meetings. They always ignored the things that happened, regarded them as unique, as single-shot adventures of desperate men.

“Just as our environment is suffering from pollution, our social and political structures are being menaced by creatures that—”

There was a crash at the back of the auditorium and people gasped, turning in their seats. Tony Stark’s dark eyes jumped to the highest level. An exit door had smashed open. Yellow-clad men with weapons were charging through,

coming down the aisle. They were firing indiscriminately into the audience. Students were screaming and swearing, falling over to collapse limply under the feet of others.

A second door thudded open and more yellow-clad invaders poured in. But Tony Stark was already in motion. In an instant he had recognized and identified the troops of AIM and was sprinting across the lecture stage toward his all-important attaché case.

An invader paused on the steps to fire down at the running figure in the dark, conservative business suit. The grid flashed but the invader's aim was disrupted by a protesting student.

"Hey, who the blazes are you guys? What are you—" The invader swung the butt of his glittering weapon hard into the stomach of the student. The youth's air was expelled in a gasp that was lost amid the screams and yells. When the AIM trooper swung his sleep gun back toward the dais he had no target. Tony Stark had disappeared. Angrily, the AIM mercenary swept his weapon toward the surrounding crowd, felling several who collapsed at once.

The sergeant in charge brushed past the trooper brandishing an odd, bulky hand weapon. "Find him, find Stark!" he commanded with a shout. The sergeant aimed his pistollike weapon at a halfback who was coming up the aisle, head down. The weapon made a high-pitched ponging sound and the football player screamed and fell, twitching as the weapon made a close hit on his nervous system.

Below, Happy Hogan met the first AIM warrior with a left jab and a right cross that caved in the cylindrical helmet, dropping the trooper where he stood. The ex-prizefighter moved ahead, weaving and dodging, knowing that he was giving Stark time. Vital time.

His progress down the aisles was impeded by hysterical students, who did not know the weapons were sleep-inducing guns. They thought their fellow students that had

fallen were dead. They inflicted injuries on their classmates as they scrambled over seats and fought to get out the exit doors. The AIM soldiers were not in the least interested in the students. They had hoped to knock out enough of them to make a quick dash through the crowd and grab Anthony Stark.

Happy Hogan ducked under the beam of one sleep gun and pummeled its wielder unmercifully. The gun dropped and, before Happy could seize it, it was kicked under the seats by panicking students.

But not all the students were in panic. Some were using whatever weapons they had—books, pocket calculators, their own bodies. One senior saw his first love topple back into her seat, and stood gaping at her for a long moment. All his life he had thought he was a pacifist, but standing there, seeing the seemingly lifeless body of his precious Amy slumped in her seat, his rage grew until it consumed him. He jumped over the supine body of a math major and grabbed the arm of an AIM mercenary. Without a moment's hesitation, the student sank his teeth into the yellow-garbed arm. The AIM trooper let out a scream and tried to fire his sleep gun at the gnawing student, but the crowd was too tight.

The student pulled the soldier into the space between the seats, took several blows upon the head, then began smashing the soldier's head against the concrete floor. The helmet slipped off and the student could see the bulging eyes and blood-splattered head. But he kept right on battering until a passing AIM soldier casually zapped him. The student fell forward, pinning the unconscious trooper beneath him.

Suddenly, the side door flew off its hinges and a gold-and-red figure crashed through.

Iron Man!

The colorful Shellhead was recognized at once, by both students and invaders. At once, the golden armor was a target for a half-dozen beams from the AIM weapons. But Iron Man was not to be toppled by anything that simple. With electronic precision and at the speed of light the suit's sensors absorbed, analyzed, and neutralized the charge. The sleep beams never penetrated the armor, the alpha-wave particles never tangled Tony Stark's brain.

"Iron Man!" the AIM sergeant snarled. His hopes of snatching Stark easily were smashed. Their intelligence had said that Stark would be there that day with only Hogan as bodyguard. Iron Man's whereabouts were unknown, but he had not been reported in Stark's vicinity for several weeks. So much for intelligence reports.

The snarling sergeant aimed his hand weapon at Iron Man, seeing that the sleep guns were doing nothing. Another intelligence report down the drain. The tame AIM scientists had been certain the alpha waves would snarl Iron Man's thinking, bring him down like a junked car into the compactor.

Iron Man was darting back and forth, his metal fists smashing into yellow helmets, his boot-jets sending him up and over clots of collapsed students, to come face to face with the minions of AIM. The sergeant took careful aim, then triggered his nerve tangler.

Iron Man felt the faint electrical charge and knew that his armor was approaching an overload of conflicting pressures. The NEED circuits—for Neutralizing Exterior Electronic Defense—were receiving too much data. Iron Man made a quick mental note: build redundancy circuits, put in *more.* Figure out a way to keep the weight and—most importantly—the power drainage down.

The golden armor glinted fire as Iron Man sprinted away, dodging through the AIM horde, felling them with right and left punches. Some fell without his touching them and Iron

Man realized the invaders' leader was sacrificing his own men to get at the Avenger.

Iron Man touched off his boot-jets, rising like a rocket above the melee and streaking in toward the figure with the blazing hand weapon. Reacting swiftly, the sergeant reached out and grabbed a cowering coed. He pulled the screaming young woman to her feet and put the muzzle of his strange-looking weapon to her temple.

Iron Man—uncertain of what the nerve tangler might do at that range—banked off, skimming closely by the struggling pair. He saw the stark terror and panic in the woman's eyes as she stared helplessly at him.

Iron Man landed behind the sergeant and ripped a seat from its bolts, lifting it into the air, hoping to smash it into the captor's back. But the sergeant was quick. Having diverted Iron Man for the needed split second, he made a vital decision.

"Out! Everybody scram!" he ordered.

The AIM soldiers who were still on their feet needed no urging. One who was bent over from a blow to his solar plexus, delivered by Happy Hogan's best left hook, lurched toward the exit, grateful to be able to run and not fear retribution from his squad leader or . . . anyone above. But he was not to get away so easily. Hogan grabbed him by the back of the neck, ripped him erect, and gave him a solid right cross to the chin. The warrior fell among those he had brought to sudden sleep.

The sergeant had swung the coed around and Iron Man almost launched the seat, but recovered in time. AIM troopers were charging up the steps, those that could. The sergeant released the girl long enough to pull a gray egg from his pocket. Iron Man recognized it at once—an AIM concussion grenade. If it went off in the small auditorium it would pulverize the flesh of all those lying asleep. There

would be no time to get them out. They would be dead, shredded and bloody.

Iron Man charged at the sergeant, his boot-jets flaming. The invader's weapon was no longer pointed at the coed's head—there was a slight chance!

The sergeant's gloved fingers twisted the calibrated end of the big, gray egg, activating the powerful explosive. With his smile hidden beneath his helmet the sergeant tossed the egg into the seats. It fell into the lap of a young woman, slumped sideways, her mouth gaping, her eyes closed.

Iron Man did not try to pursue the sergeant, or any of those fleeing the auditorium. He plunged toward the immensely powerful grenade. He had seen what the AIM minibombs could do—crush the walls of a sturdily built house, bring down its roof, send bits of plaster, television sets, and linoleum tile to rain down over the neighborhood, smash windows for blocks. .

. . . time slowed . . .

. . . it did not stop, but to Iron Man it seemed to slow . . .

. . . he saw everything clearly, with an awful, final exactness . . .

. . . the grenade had gone into *that* row, near *that* student . . .

. . . if it had fallen to the floor, he might never find it in time . . .

. . . his armored body seemed to float, to glide with agonizing slowness toward the area . . .

. . . in *there* somewhere . . .

. . . what would he do?

. . . grab it, tear through the roof and catapult it into space?

. . . but what if there was not enough time? What if the AIM killer had set its fuse short? What if, as he was reaching

back to send it up, it exploded? It would bring down the roof, crushing those beneath, sending the sleeping students into a final sleep . . .

. . . *there!*

. . . incredulously, Iron Man saw the gray ovoid lying in the lap of the coed, caught in the scoop of her skirt.

. . . Iron Man's metal-gloved hand caught it up and in one unthinking motion he cradled it to his chest, wrapped both his arms around it, smothered it—and his boot-jets flared.

Iron Man hit the roof with his back, smashing through it, ripping through the cast concrete and the strong metal reinforcing rods, sending sharp-edged bits flying out. He broke through and in that instant the grenade exploded against his chest.

The impact sent Iron Man flying even higher, blasting him upward with the power of a minor rocket. But he was not aware of it for Tony Stark was unconscious.

His chest hurt with an unbearable pain he must bear, or die. He'd felt it before. His heart was failing.

He'd felt it before . . . in Viet Nam.

Two

Wong-chu was a big man, for an Oriental or any other kind. His face was set in a perpetual sneer. He was the guerrilla chieftain for an entire area. He had often refused offers to be moved to higher posts, to more important positions, because he was exactly where he wanted to be—in the front lines, where his word was not only law, it was life and death.

He stood in the center of the small village of Glong-lu, his fists upon his hips, his lips twisted in an arrogant sneer. Another village had been subdued, brought under the command of the Vietcong. Wong-chu was once again a conqueror.

The conquering had actually been done by his black pajama-clad troops, in the main, though guided by Wong-chu's genius. But the burly man with the high forehead liked his conquests to be ultimately personal.

"Now for the wrestling match!" he said loudly. "If any prisoner can defeat Wong-chu, I will free the whole village!"

Wong-chu! They were captured by Wong-chu himself! The people of the village cringed. They were not warriors. War

had been going on as long as any could remember, and they had suffered from it. Their young men seldom became warriors. They were pawns, and knew it. But still, it was worth a chance.

Their eyes went to Chom Klao. He had been to Bangkok; he had taken lessons in the martial arts for almost a year. He had defeated all the country youths, as well as the older men. He would fight for them. He *had* to fight, even though it was at very long odds.

No one said anything. Chom Klao felt their eyes. He knew that if there was anyone in their village who stood a chance it was his humble self. Chom Klao looked at his young wife. If he failed, the conquerors would take her, almost certainly. She was young and beautiful, with long, black hair as fine as silk.

She, too, was looking at him.

Chom Klao stepped forward and bowed to the larger figure of Wong-chu. The guerrilla leader barely returned the traditional bow of respect. Chom Klao went into his best defense posture, his face stern and impassive.

Wong-chu looked at him with contempt. “Come here, boy. Attack me. Let us get this over with. I have things to do.”

Chom Klao wet his lips with a furtive tongue. He must not let the big invader rattle him. What had his teacher said on that first day? “The only practical reason to take up the study of unarmed combat is so that you won’t have to use it.”

Chom Klao began to circle. Wong-chu followed him with his eyes, too contemptuous to turn, and only turned when the younger, smaller man was almost behind him.

Chom Klao knew he would be hurt. Wong-chu was too big, too powerful. But he was also too arrogant; that could hurt him. The villager thought: when you are a fighter, the first thing you have to learn to do is accept pain. I will get hit and

if that stops me or destroys my concentration or distracts me, then I shall be defeated. I am fighting for my life, and the life of my village—and my wife.

The only way I can survive is to remember . . . no, more than remember, I have to have the *instinct,* even if I am hit and hit badly . . . even fatally . . . I am still going to go through with it and nothing will stop me.

Nothing.

He will not hesitate to kill me. We have heard of him before. He is vicious and he enjoys his viciousness. He plays with us, with this offer, but we must accept.

Chom Klao made his move.

It wasn't good enough. With ease—with contemptuous, humiliating ease—Wong-chu sent Chom Klao into the dust. The villager rolled over, hurt but game, and came to his feet. He came in again, but more cautiously, and with a swift move Wong-chu once more sent the young man crashing to the earth.

While he waited for Chom Klao to rise, the warlord swept his eyes over the newly conquered villagers. They looked slightly better off than most. That one wore American Army clothes, that one had shoes . . . and that one was extraordinarily attractive. She would be his part of the spoils.

Suddenly impatient, Wong-chu waited no longer. He grasped the rising youth and prepared to destroy him. But Chom Klao twisted away, striking Wong-chu in the thigh with a solidly delivered blow. The guerrilla commander took a swift step forward, and with a double-handed blow sent Chom Klao into the dirt, where he did not move.

"Ah, you are good," the guerrilla said, "but Wong-chu is better!" He looked at the others. "Are there more?"

There was desperation on the faces of the men. Chom Klao had been their best hope. But then they noticed that

Wong-chu had a slight limp. He seemed to be breathing hard. Perhaps there *was* a chance.

An older man stepped forward. He did not survive the first throw. A second, younger man, Ananda Mong-kut, who had lifted a water buffalo when it had fallen into a cleft of rock, stepped forward. He survived the first fall, but did not rise from the second. His jaw was broken.

“I am the strongest of all!” Wong-chu snarled. “Next to Wong-chu other men are but fleas!” He turned to his next-in-command. “It is over! Now let us plunder the town. For *none* can stop the victorious Wong-chu!” The guerrilla leader pointed at the young woman who was crying over the unconscious body of Chom Klao. “That one. Bring her to me . . . there.”

The grinning lieutenant seized the young woman’s arm. She was the best in the village, of that there was no doubt. Wong-chu would break her spirit and later, if he followed his usual pattern, he would give her to his next-in-command. All nicely broken in. Or broken.

Tony Stark had been wearing civilian clothes as he inspected his top secret field-testing laboratory. He listened seriously to a young captain as they stood on the edge of a helicopter landing pad near the green jungle’s beginning.

“The Red guerrillas outnumber us. Our heavy artillery could beat them, but we can’t transport such big weapons through the dense jungle,” the officer said.

Both men knew air support could be effective—providing you knew where the enemy was. Not even the defoliants were 100% effective, stripping the jungle of its green cover so that they could see the movements.

“So that’s where my midget transistors come in, eh?” Stark said. He had developed experimental mortars and

sighting devices with reduced size and weight, but with increased accuracy.

“Right,” the officer said. “Thanks to you we—”

“Take cover!” a sergeant shouted.

“Get on that chopper and get out of here,” the officer said to Stark, grabbing at his elbow. “Those Charlies will be in here in moments!”

“Nope, that’s why I was sent here,” Stark protested, pulling toward the jungle. “To make sure my weapons work as planned. If not, I’ll fix ’em on the spot!” They could hear the rattle of machine guns, then the crump of mortars—Vietcong mortars.

The captain said some nasty words that were lost in the noise, then steered Stark into a slit trench. They listened as the Americans fought back. Over the radio they heard of the Vietcong’s retreat and some time later the young captain let Stark out of the slit trench.

“It’s all right now, I think,” he said.

“I want to see how the weapons did and talk to the men who used them,” Stark said. “It’s one thing to test them on nice safe testing grounds, with no one shooting at you and plenty of time, but it’s entirely different under actual combat conditions.”

The captain understood and with a small party of armed men they set out into the surrounding jungle. The men were careful to keep Stark in the middle because the jungle holds a thousand natural perils. But when man has set out to make the jungle even *more* dangerous, the risks grow even greater.

Stark felt something against his shoe—a root or vine, perhaps. As the explosion threw him into the greenery, Stark’s last thought was: *booby trap.*

Moments later four black-clad Vietcong came out of the jungle. There were still bits and pieces of this and that

falling or sliding from broad green leaves to dark earth. Dripping, oozing, dropping. The soldiers went from one body to another, but the leader went at once to one who was not dressed like the others.

“Yankee civilian still alive,” he said, as Stark moaned. Perhaps he was an important government official. Wong-chu might reward him. He gave orders. They had to hurry; the other Americans were coming.

Stark gasped with pain as they lifted him and gratefully slipped into unconsciousness as they melted into the jungle, carrying his limp body between them.

They did what they could. His chest was bandaged, his bruises and lacerations treated. Their medicine was crude, but basically effective. Stark lay half conscious on a cot, feigning an even greater weakness than he felt. He could hear someone talking to the young doctor who had been treating him. Stark knew just enough of the language to piece out what they were saying.

They knew he was a “Yankee weapons inventor” and the officer was asking how he was.

“Bad!” the doctor said sadly. “Much shrapnel near his heart! Impossible to operate. Cannot live longer than one week!”

One week.

Stark opened his eyes and looked at the bamboo ceiling.

One week to live.

“In a few days the shrapnel will reach his heart,” the doctor said. “Then he will die. There is nothing we can do. Nothing will save him.”

The officer snorted contemptuously. “We can *use* his genius. Wong-chu will trick him into spending his last days on earth working for *us!* Is he strong enough now?”

The doctor hesitated. “Yes, he can work . . . until the shrapnel reaches his heart.”

Tony Stark heard the officer enter the room. The doctor lifted him up and peered into his shirt. They had replaced his own American garments with black Vietcong clothes, which were loose and sloppy, like pajamas. Stark looked up and saw the officer for the first time.

“I am Wong-chu,” the guerrilla said in English. Stark looked him over. Heavyset, thin mustache and small, pointed beard on a wide, self-indulgent face. High forehead, thick hair cut short, crossed bandoliers of ammunition pouches, small handgun in a black holster, regulation Chinese Army uniform without Chinese insignia, heavy boots.

“Anthony Stark.” He knew they had his name. He had been carrying a wallet full of identification, as well as a letter from the Secretary of Defense, requesting all military commanders to render full cooperation.

Wong-chu began without the usual Oriental preamble. “We know you are American weapons inventor. If you design powerful new weapon for *me,* I have surgeon save your life!”

Stark did not need to be reminded that as a civilian he was not covered under the Articles of War, even if the Vietcong had been inclined to comply with them. He also knew, from his eavesdropping, that the guerrilla commander was lying. If they *could* do it, they’d do it now, he thought, to be sure I live long enough to design weapons for them.

The pain in his chest was dull, but persistent. Stark knew he only had days to live, but there was something about the big, posturing guerrilla that rankled the industrialist. Stark knew then that if it was his last act, he would defeat Wong-chu.

Stark grinned lopsidedly and shrugged his shoulders as he rubbed at a bruise. “All right, Wong-chu, I’ll do it.”

“I knew you not hesitate to betray your country to save yourself,” the Chinese soldier smirked.

A dark look passed over Stark’s face. “Where there’s life, there’s hope,” he shrugged. “Maybe I can persuade you to let me live, and *maybe* go on to greater glory.”

“Do not think to betray me, Anthony Stark,” Wong-chu snapped. “You will be watched. And there is no place to go—nothing but jungle outside, for miles.”

Stark nodded, grim faced, and Wong-chu took him to a cluttered shed. The place was a mess, filled with trash, discarded tools, and some brand-new equipment.

“Here is room where you will work,” Wong-chu said, gesturing around. “Plenty of scrap iron! Plenty tools.”

“This I promise you,” Stark said. “I shall build the most fantastic weapon of all time!”

Wong-chu looked at him shrewdly. “What is it you will build for Wong-chu?”

Stark stalled. “I’m . . . I’m not certain. Your supplies and equipment are limited. I’ll have to tailor my . . . my invention to what you have here, or what I know you have around here.”

Wong-chu grunted and started to leave. “I’ll need complete privacy,” Stark said quickly. The guerrilla leader looked at him suspiciously, his mean mouth turning down. “The thought processes . . . it’s the way I work . . . You know how it is,” Stark added. “You *almost* have an idea and someone interrupts and it goes—poof!”

Wong-chu nodded reluctantly and left. Stark went to the door and listened. Wong-chu was saying something to the guards outside, but the inventor couldn’t quite catch it.

“I’ll build one, all right,” Stark muttered as he locked the thin door. “But it will be *mine* . . . made for only one purpose

—to keep me alive!”

Stark made a quick survey of the materials available in the littered shed. Then he thought for most of the rest of the day, making cryptic notes on scraps of rice paper.

“Every tick of the clock brings that piece of shrapnel closer to my heart,” he thought grimly. “I’ve got to work faster than I’ve ever worked before! I can’t afford a single mistake!”

An idea he had once thought of had come to his mind. He quickly examined it for flaws, then for adjustment to the materials at hand. It had been far down on his priority list, as it was obviously an expensive creation, one not suited to the mass-production methods of modern warfare.

Stark drew plans far into the night, then fell into an exhausted sleep. In the morning a silent medic entered, changed Stark’s bandage, and then allowed him to have a bowl of rice and a cup of water. As soon as the medic left, Stark was back at the drawing table.

About noon he was interrupted by Wong-chu. The muscular guerrilla threw a body through the door. Stark saw that it was an elderly oriental, his face braised but intelligent.

“This old one is Professor Yinsen!” Wong-chu growled, aiming a casual kick at the huddled body. The old man scurried out of reach, terror filling his face. “Once great scientist,” Wong-chu said with all the contempt that men of action have for men of the mental arenas. “Now lowly manservant of Wong-chu.” The guerrilla pointed a stained finger at the cowering old man. *“That* will help you build weapon!”

The old man looked at Stark and his face changed. Determination came into it, replacing the undignified fear. “No!” the old man said. “I will *never* help the Red tyrants!

Never!” He shouted the last word as he attempted to get to his feet.

Wong-chu merely snorted his contempt and back-handed the old man, sending him into a painful sprawl. The guerrilla looked hard at Stark, then tapped his breast. Stark got the message.

After the guerrilla chieftain had left, Stark helped the old man to a seat before his improvised workbench. “Professor Yinsen, in college I read your books. You were the greatest physicist in the Orient, perhaps the world! Everyone thought you had died. How did you—” Starked stopped, embarrassed.

“How did I become a mere manservant to a petty tyrant?” The elderly Oriental sighed and held his battered head. “I’d have been better off if I *had* died. When I refused to help them on their atom bomb and other projects, they . . . imprisoned me and . . . did other things.” The old man sighed. “Do you have some water?”

Stark quickly fetched some water and held the tin cup to the wrinkled lips. “When they gave up on me, I was pressed into a slave-labor battalion by the Reds. I was a long way from my home in Hong Kong. I had no friends. No one would help me—they were afraid. Eventually, I fell into the hands of Wong-chu.”

The old man looked around. “I will not help you, whoever you are. This could all be an elaborate ruse . . .”

“Professor, I’m Tony Stark.” In a few words Stark told the story of his wounding and capture.

“I took a medical degree, Tony Stark, but that was many, many years ago. I do not have the skills, the eyesight, or the equipment to operate on you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right, Professor Yinsen.” Stark hesitated. He had come to a crucial decision. Since he could no longer

work in secret he had either to abandon his idea . . . or to reveal it to the professor—who *could* be a ringer.

Stark took a deep breath and made his decision. He *had* to trust this human being. “Professor, look, let me show you this.” Stark pulled the tattered, rumpled sheets of rice paper from their hiding place and laid them out on the workbench. The old man looked at Stark suspiciously, but his own curiosity got the better of him. His eyes widened as he grasped the first significant idea. Then his bony hands shuffled the irregular sheets quickly, peering closely at numbers and designs.

He clasped his hands with delight. “An iron man! Fantastic! A mighty electronic body to keep your heart beating after the shrapnel reaches it! We might just succeed!” He looked up at Stark and the American saw life in his eyes for the first time. “Think what a creature we could create, Tony Stark! What *wonders* he could perform!”

Stark gestured around the shed. “And the Reds themselves have given us all the materials we shall need.”

Yinsen grabbed Stark’s arm. “Yes, Tony Stark, I will help you! The idea is magnificent—*and* it will strike back at them!”

Thus a dying man’s desperate race against time took on new life. They cannibalized radios and Stark rebuilt them, redesigning them to perform new functions. Yinsen concentrated on the mechanical aspects of their project. “All activity must be coordinated perfectly,” Stark said. “The iron frame must duplicate every action of the human body.”

“It shall, my friend, it shall,” promised the old man. “This shall be the crowning achievement of my life!”

The hours passed into days. Every hour brought the fragment of shrapnel closer and closer to Tony Stark’s heart. The rugged American fought it as much as he could, but even the strongest body has a weak link.

“I can feel the pressure,” he muttered as he took a break Yinsen had forced upon him. Gray-faced, Stark looked at the old man. “My time is running out. We must work faster!”

The old man did not answer. He was bent over, welding a final piece of metal in place. Then he stood up, turned off the hissing torch, and slapped the curving plate. “There! The self-lubrication system is complete. Just a little longer, my American friend. You must have courage.”

Stark nodded weakly. He had courage. What he didn’t have was strength. Every movement brought him pain, every breath brought him a touch closer to the ultimate fade-out. He moved slowly . . . and began to make mistakes. More time was taken up correcting them. Then Stark collapsed.

The thin professor got him to rest, but two hours later he dragged himself up and stood weakly, bracing himself on the workbench. He had never felt so bad, so weak, nor so close to death. The old man worked feverishly, bent and gnarled over the electronic interior of a curving piece of metal. Stark’s knees shook. He was dangerously close to collapse, and this time he didn’t think he’d get up.

Professor Yinsen threw a screwdriver into the clutter of the workbench, then lifted the heavy, metal slab. “The life-giving heart of your iron body is ready, Tony Stark,” he said. “Quickly! Clamp it around your chest!”

Stark looked over with pain-wracked eyes, saw the breastplate’s interior, it’s electronic maze designed to do a great variety of things. The foremost and most important of these was keeping him alive. He reached with quivering hands for the heavy metal plate. The old man helped him strap it on, but before it was finished Stark fell back, staggering.

The cot almost collapsed under his crashing weight. The old man kept at his work with hard-faced determination. He clamped the less sophisticated parts of the metal suit

around Stark’s unmoving figure. He glanced at Stark’s gray face, at the beads of sweat on the pale flesh. Stark was dying.

Then the final piece of the suit was in place. “There, it is done,” the old man said. “When I activate the machine, it will send the power into your amazing design. Your own fantastic suit will keep your heart beating as long as the iron body operates.”

Yinsen crossed the room and his bony hand grasped the switch, pulling it to the ON position. The generator would soon build up enough energy to furnish all the power Stark’s new iron suit would need. The electricity flowed and the Chinese scientist watched as the transistors and other electronic gadgetry within the suit began to function properly.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

The narrow eyes of the old man opened in fear. The small red light they had installed to give them advance warning of the approach of anyone along the walk to the shed was blinking. “It must be Wong-chu!” The guerrilla leader visited them daily, his suspicious eyes roaming over the parts of the iron suit—which they kept separated in order to confuse him—and, if he found the suit assembled, Yinsen knew all their work would be in vain.

Quickly, Yinsen checked the generator and the wiring that ran to the iron suit. “My life is of no consequence,” the elderly scientist thought. “But I must gain time for the iron man to live!” Yinsen moved quickly to the door and peered out. “Wong-chu must be kept away until the electronic body begins to function! Stark’s heart must be kept working!”

Yinsen threw open the door and ran out, closing it behind him. “Death to Wong-chu!” the old man cried. “Death to the evil tyrant!” Yinsen shook his fist at Wong-chu, then started to run toward the hut where the ammunition was kept.

The soldiers leveled their guns, then looked to Wong-chu for orders. The burly guerrilla snarled. “He has gone mad! After him!” he commanded. “End his miserable life before he can do any damage. He is of no further use to me.”

Wong-chu watched as the rumpled, khaki-clad figures ran down the space between the sheds after the disappearing Yinsen. Then slowly, thoughtfully, Wong-chu turned and started toward the hut where Tony Stark lay near death.

The sound of gunshots made Wong-chu stop and look toward the ammunition shed. Three shots. Just right. The old fool had not done any harm, and he had been stopped.

Inside the shed, the life-sustaining machine built up more and more power in the iron suit. Tony Stark’s heart still beat and he began to come back from the semiconscious state in which his injuries had placed him. He had been too weak to stop Yinsen, but as he heard Wong-chu’s shouted command to drag the body away, Tony Stark, using his new name for the first time, made a solemn vow.

“You will not have died in vain, my friend! I swear it! The *Iron Man* swears it!”

The machine was keeping him alive. His experimental design was working. And the part of it that had been the most experimental was also working! The transistor-powered circuits were coordinating with his brain waves, picking them up in a three-dimensional matrix from critical points around the interior of his helmet. He lifted an arm and looked at his metal-covered hand.

In his weakened condition he should not have been able to lift the heavy metal arm, but with the electrically powered circuits and the ingenious handcrafted hydraulics the arm lifted as easily as his own would have, had he been in perfect health.

“My suit works . . . The machine controls it just as any living human brain controls its own body.” He sat up and

swung his feet to the floor, then with a gasp, stood up.

But the suit was overreacting and Stark lost his balance. He crashed to the floor with a thud that shook the shed. Outside the metal shed Wong-chu heard the crash and his meaty fist turned the doorknob. But the door did not move.

“Why is this door locked?” the guerrilla snapped, not knowing of the snap lock his two prisoners had installed. He turned to the soldiers approaching, dragging the bullet-riddled body of the old scientist by the heels. “Come here!” he commanded. “Break this door down!”

Inside, Stark was getting to his feet. His head was dizzy, and there was a faint pain in his chest. He knew that without the all-important chest plate he would now be dead.

“I’m like a baby learning to walk,” he thought desperately. “But I don’t have *time!* I must learn now, quickly, before they get in and overpower me!”

Stark fought desperately, trying to get the knack of controlling the massively heavy, immensely complex, and potentially very powerful device he was wearing. The brain which had mastered some of the most important fields of contemporary science was also capable of mastering a new body.

Even as Stark heard the first blows thudding on the door he began to walk. Feeling like Frankenstein’s monster, Stark thought, “I have it now . . . I can stand and walk without toppling . . .”

“Smash it in!” Wong-chu growled. “I must know what has happened in there!”

Stark was still moving around like a baby, awkwardly thumping back and forth. “They’re coming,” he thought, knowing he was not yet ready to fight. He could stand and walk, but little more. Each movement was likely to be an overreaction. “This is the greatest test—sheer survival. Can this thing I created survive? The . . . *thing* which is less than

human, yet far more than merely human! This thing which is now an indispensable part of Anthony Stark!”

Through the eye slits Stark looked at himself in a cracked mirror. He looked like a robot, smooth and thick limbed. The metal was anodized yellow—a golden life form. “My brain still thinks,” he told himself. “My heart still beats! But in order to remain alive must I remain forever within this iron prison?” His eyes, staring out at himself, were filled with pain. The Man in the Iron Mask. Frankenstein’s monster in steel. A flexible golden coffin.

Blam! Blam-blam-blam!

The shots into the lock of the door brought Stark back from his thoughts to the bitter realization that he must do something now, this very second, and never mind what tomorrow might bring. Knowing he was still too weak and too unskilled in the use of his new iron suit to fight them, Anthony Stark knew he must conceal himself.

But where! The shed was not large. They would search. Then inspiration struck. The iron suit had been cleverly constructed. There were a number of attachments and built-in devices that could be used. Swiftly, Stark picked off the workbench a pair of large suction cups and fixed them to his hands. Then he activated the air-pressure jets of his boots and shot into the air.

“They work!” Stark thought exultantly as he fastened his hands to the metal roof. He was hidden away in a shadowed part of the ceiling. And none too soon, for at that moment the door sagged open and several gun-bearing guerrillas charged in. Wong-chu strode in arrogantly behind them. The guerrillas quickly looked behind every bench and opened every large box.

“The Yankee has gone,” Wong-chu growled. “He built us no weapons!” He gestured to the outside. “He cannot be far! He must have run when his sniveling companion did.

Find him and dispose of him as you did the other who dared defy me!”

Above his head Tony Stark smiled thinly. They hadn’t thought to look over their heads, and now the safest place Stark could be was in the shed.

“While you hunt down the Yankee, I shall amuse myself at my favorite sport,” Wong-chu declared as he left. The soldiers departed and closed the wrecked door behind them.

Stark waited in the shadows. He knew what Wong-chu’s favorite sport was: hurting defenseless prisoners. They were forced to fight him hand to hand and he easily defeated each one, punishing them ruthlessly with his fists and feet.

“They killed the professor,” Stark thought with still-growing anger. “A man who never harmed anyone in his life! The murdering *swine,* the—” He broke off his anger. Revenge, to be effective, must be done in cold blood, in measured, thoughtful, carefully controlled action. “They’ll pay for his death,” he thought. “I swear it!”

Stark dropped to the floor, his air jets controlling his descent so he did not crash to the ground. At that moment Anthony Stark saw himself, encased in his metal armor, reflected in the cracked mirror. He lifted a metal fist and used his new name, the name which came easily and naturally to his lips.

“Iron Man swears it!”

Stark moved to the window and cautiously lifted the curtain. Wong-chu was already at the prisoners’ cage, calling out for “volunteers” to fight him. There was nothing Stark could do for them now and he dropped the curtain.

“Yes, Wong-chu,” he muttered. “Amuse yourself . . . while you still can! For our moment of reckoning is almost at hand!”

Stark moved around the room, moving his arms and legs, gaining better control by the moment. He heard the gasp of

the prisoners and the scream of pain from a “volunteer.” Stark’s head came up. Ready or not, he was going to have to act.

With his metal-gloved hand Stark reached for the dirty, blood-flecked trench coat he had been wearing when wounded. He struggled into it. It was a tight fit over the armor. He heard Wong-chu’s arrogant voice demanding another challenger. Stark picked up a hat and put it on. Then he left the shed.

In the area before the prisoners’ cage Wong-chu had just dashed his frightened “challenger” to the ground. Uttering a snort of contempt Wong-chu shouted with pride. “I win again!”

“None can defeat the mighty warlord!” a soldier shouted and others joined in. They knew how to keep their commander happy.

“I say he is a coward!” a voice from the edge of the crowd said. “I *challenge* Wong-chu!”

The big guerrilla’s head snapped around. “Who *dares* speak thus to Wong-chu? Show yourself! Let me see the face of the one I am about to destroy!”

A shadowed figure came through the crowd. Taller than the Oriental guerrillas, dressed in an oddly fitting trench coat, the figure came into the cleared area. “As you wish, tyrant,” the figure said. His hands swept the hat from his head and then, with disconcerting ease, tore the trench coat from his body.

Wong-chu stared, his mouth gaping in surprise. “Why do you stare, Wong-chu?” Anthony Stark asked. “What is wrong? Have you never seen an iron man before?”

Golden armor. Thick boots. Rounded, skull-like head. Eye slits, featureless mask. A faint aroma of oil and the ozone of electronic gear.

“You . . . you are not human!” Wong-chu said, his hand shaking as he pointed. “You are a *machine!”*

“And you are the heartless man of evil who is about to pay for his misdeeds!” Iron Man took a step toward the uniformed Wong-chu. It was not the man’s political views he was about to fight, nor the fact that he was a leader in an unconventional war. Iron Man was about to fight a murdering, merciless tyrant.

Wong-chu’s trained responses came into play. He attempted to defend himself, but the power of Iron Man struck right through his defenses, which were powered only by ordinary human muscles. Before the startled eyes of the Red guerrillas, and before the amazed gaze of the imprisoned Vietnamese, two electronically powered arms seized the guerrilla leader and lifted him high in the air as easily as a toy!

“You are not facing a wounded, dying man now,” Iron Man growled as he twirled the helpless Wong-chu over his head. “Or an aged, gentle professor!”

The powerful golden arms straightened and Wong-chu tumbled awkwardly through the air to crash into the jungle. “This is Iron Man who opposes you, and all you stand for!”

Wong-chu, hurt and angry, felt he was far enough out of the fire zone. The strange metal man had made him lose face, but there was no human that could not be destroyed, one way or another. “Guards!” he commanded. “Open fire! Destroy that, that iron man!”

Tony Stark had a moment of fear. He had engaged Wong-chu when he was still not perfectly at ease in his life-support armor. Now he faced the bullets of a small army of jungle-trained guerrillas. They responded obediently. Their guns blasted. At this close range they could hardly miss.

And they didn’t.

Lead slugs ricocheted off the golden armor, whining away into the jungle air. Stark reacted automatically, almost cringing as the powerful lead bullets struck him. But almost at once he realized his suit was even better than he had thought. Not only was it strong enough to withstand even the close-order firing squad, but its electronic defenses compensated for the massive blows being struck to the golden armor. Realizing this, Stark stood straight, taking the thundering volley with an almost exulting pride.

Iron Man could take it!

Blam! Pinnng! Ka-pow! Pow!

“Get grenades, you fools!” Wong-chu shouted. “Bring bazookas! Quickly!”

But Iron Man was too swift, too powerful for the small guerrilla force. Wong-chu retreated to a nearby building and attempted to take control by broadcasting his commands over the camp loudspeakers. But it was easy enough for Iron Man’s new suit to create enough electrical interference to drown out his words with static.

Iron Man then took over the loudspeakers. “Desert Wong-chu! Flee into the jungle! None can defeat Iron Man! Flee, before he slays you all!”

In their panic the guerrillas confused Iron Man’s words with those of Wong-chu. Without leadership and scattered, they would be captured by the South Vietnamese. But the battle with Wong-chu was not over.

Tony Stark was not yet totally confident in his employment of the iron suit. Wong-chu momentarily trapped him with a filing cabinet full of heavy weights. The freshly powered suit was almost out of power. Its batteries had not been fully charged and the drain on them was fantastic. Iron Man was growing weaker.

Wong-chu started running . . . toward the prisoners’ cage. Iron Man realized Wong-chu intended to slay them all. There

were to be no witnesses to Wong-chu's defeat, no one for the victorious Iron Man to rescue.

Iron Man did not stop to think. He swiftly unfastened a portion of his lubricating apparatus and squirted a thin stream of oil past the running guerrilla leader into the ammunition shed. Then a searing flame from Iron Man's built-in flare gun set the oil to burning. The flame raced along the oil streak . . . faster than a man could run.

The explosion pulverized the shed, and anyone near it.

Wong-chu had been racing along right next to it.

Hours later Iron Man stood over the grave of Professor Yinsen. "It's all over," he said softly. "Rest easy. You, who sacrificed your life to save mine, have been avenged."

Iron Man turned away. His new iron suit having been recharged, Stark found he could move about with only the chest plate in place. The armor he carried in a small suitcases, Tony Stark started back through the jungle, toward the South Vietnamese lines.

Iron Man. Anthony Stark would never again be *just* Anthony Stark, industrialist. Nor just playboy Tony Stark, hedonist and debonair jet-setter.

There would always be Iron Man. I cannot escape him, Tony Stark thought. Nor do I want to. Iron Man stands for something. Just what, I'm not certain, he thought. But as long as the metal lay next to his heart he would *have* to be Iron Man . . .

. . . The pain in the heart . . .

. . ."Mister Stark!"

. . . Distant voices, calling to him . . .

. . . "Mister Stark, sir, come out of it!"

Tony Stark opened his eyes. Happy Hogan leaned over him. They were in a small anteroom to the auditorium. Tony

Stark was no longer in the golden armor of Iron Man, except for the ever-vital breastplate. He lay on a couch, with a blanket hiding the metal plate.

“Oh, thank God, sir,” Happy said as he saw Stark open his eyes. The ex-prizefighter looked around. “I brought ya in here, sir. Ya wuz knocked out, but everything wuz so confused, I don’t think anyone noticed.” He leaned closer. “Everything all right, sir?”

“Yes, Happy,” Stark replied. He took a deep breath. “I took that grenade in the chest.”

“I saw ya, sir. Ya held it tight, to contain the blast; yes, sir, I saw that. Ya saved everyone in there, but to hear them yelling ya’d think they were more concerned about the hole in the roof than in the fact ya saved all them lives.” Happy shook his head sadly.

Stark started to rise but Happy stopped him. “Ya okay, sir? I mean, one o’ them AIM grenades is a powerful thing, y’know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stark said. He sat up, then stood up. Happy helped him into his clothes, which he had discarded when he assumed his Iron Man identity.

The newly designed armor was vastly more powerful—and almost infinitely more complex—than the simple prison-built suit he had originally constructed. That had been years before. Since then there had been one heart operation, then a heart transplant. Things had been good for a time. Tony Stark could go without his life-support system for a time—not a long time, however—and he had come to be one of the more prominent members of that strange and controversial group called The Avengers. Tony Stark had learned to keep his secret identity just that—secret. But the attack upon Anthony Stark by the AIM commandos—was that an attack on Iron Man, or an attack on Stark the inventor?

“Let’s go home,” Tony said. Happy took care of the police, took care of the press, and got the weak-acting Stark into his limousine and away.

As Stark settled back, every defense device in his long, black car set, his thoughts drifted again to the curious life he had come to have. He’d always been intelligent. He’d breezed through school, and was popular despite his obvious brains. He was curious about everything, but mostly about engineering. Things that worked—or didn’t work—intrigued him. He had a natural aptitude for invention, just as some have a natural tendency to be musicians or cooks or artists or accountants.

From the tinkering of engineering Stark had become interested in even more basic things—basic scientific research. From this came the basis of Stark’s vast fortune, of his multipurpose, many-faceted Stark International. That multinational corporation grew with startling speed, becoming a major influence in the world’s technological spheres. The man in the street might not know of Stark International, but it was certain that the big domes in the labs at General Electric, GM, the big oil companies, IBM, and many others knew exactly who and what Stark International was. The brains at NASA, at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, on the President’s Scientific Advisory Board knew who Anthony Stark was. Some deplored his expensive playboy image—others envied him. Some were jealous of his growing fortune—others wanted some of it. But only a handful of people knew that Anthony Stark, industrialist . . . and Tony Stark, charming playboy seen with some of the world’s great beauties . . . were one and the same with Iron Man.

On paper, Iron Man was Tony Stark’s bodyguard on a kind of free-lance basis. SI had often aided the Fantastic Four, The Avengers, and SHIELD in their scientific needs. The bodyguard idea and close working arrangement with the

superheroes gave good cover for any sudden appearance of Iron Man in the vicinity of Tony Stark.

Since becoming Iron Man, Tony Stark found that violence and action followed him everywhere. Before the wounding of his heart, he had led a relatively quiet life. The popping of a champagne cork or the roar of a Lear jet were the loudest sounds in his life. Since then, it sometimes seemed that life was one long battle.

But Tony Stark also found that he liked it. He had spent a very long time being tied to a workbench—or the most expensive table at the most expensive nightclub. The action excited him. He was serving a useful purpose, one that no one else could serve. His very special iron “suit” was fantastically expensive—only a multimillionaire could afford it, and then only if his life depended upon it. It was customized to a degree that was fantastic—Stark had to watch his weight, to be certain of an exact fit at all times.

Miniaturization, molecular bonding, solid-state electronics, highly expensive metal tempering, and a hundred other specialties had gone into Stark’s latest suit. But it was all still based on one thing: keeping Stark’s heart working.

The suit was crimson and gold now, a much more dramatic and functional suit than the clumsy original. Except for the chest plate it all fit into an attaché case, collapsing neatly. The famous armor had evolved over the years, but was still recognizable to millions as the fighting armor of *Iron Man,* a name that had come to mean a great deal in every part of the globe.

It was a good life. Living on the edge of death gave a zest to the whole affair. While he maintained the playboy image to help hide his secret identity, he sometimes found the trivial and shallow jet-set life relaxing. At that moment, in the black limousine speeding through the streets toward the sprawling main plant of Stark International, Tony Stark

thought about a little image building, a short spell of playing.

Beautiful women. Candlelight and wine. Good food, laughter, and not one supervillain trying to crush, rend, dismember or break his body.

Yes, that would be nice. A rest. Let the world get along without ol’ Shellhead for a while. It had for eons; it could for another few days.

He began to think of just where he would rest.

And with whom.

Three

The AIM sergeant who had tossed the concussion grenade stood in the dark underground headquarters of Advanced Idea Mechanics. It wasn’t dark where he was; a bright spotlight played on him from out of the darkness. It made the sweat on his forehead glitter like diamonds. He stank of fear and knew he smelled and hated his body for betraying him.

He knew what sat in the darkness and it scared him. Not much scared this mercenary, but his ultimate leader did. The head of AIM had a voice like a snarl come to life, a booming quality that seemed to fill the large room without effort.

“You are bumbling fools!” the voice thundered. “Why am I always served by idiots, by cretins best strangled in their cribs?”

The sergeant knew better than to try to answer. It wasn’t his fault. He’d done his best; he’d done just as he was ordered. It wasn’t their fault, or his fault, that Iron Man

appeared. He thought he had done well to escape with the remnants of his attack force, to thwart Iron Man, perhaps even to hurt him.

“You should all be destroyed as an example to the others,” snarled the AIM leader, his voice coming from the darkness. The sergeant’s knees trembled. Where his underlings were concerned the leader always kept his word.

There was an echoing snort, then: “But we have other problems.” There was a noise like badly meshing gears. It was a growl of frustration from the leader hidden in the darkness. *“Financial* problems, of all things.” Another growl. “Money! I, the greatest mind of our time, the premier inventive genius of the ages, beset by problems of . . . *money!”* The voice sneered at the last word. “Did Einstein think about *money?* No! And whose fault is it?”

The sergeant twitched despite his attitude of rigid attention. Was the question rhetorical, or did his master really want an answer? The answer was obvious: Captain America, that costumed retread from World War II, and the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, and others of the Avengers, the Defenders, those leagues of superheroes, it was their fault. Time and time again they had destroyed carefully made plans, ruined millions of dollars worth of equipment, fortresses and secret sites, laboratories and inventions. Stop their destructive actions and the secret sources of money that Advanced Idea Mechanics could draw upon would soon build the organization into one greater than it had ever been.

But stopping them was hardly easy, as many of his cohorts had found out. The sergeant was a mercenary—in it for the buck. He was not politically motivated, stupidly idealistic, or fighting for any noble cause. It was simple: with the forces that fought against what Iron Man and the others represented he had a chance. Good money, loot, a life of ease some day . . . if he lived—if his leader let him live.

“They’re everywhere, those costumed fools,” the voice thundered, as if reading the sergeant’s thoughts. “They have the most fantastic *luck!* They fall into a dry streambed and come up with pockets filled with leads to our secret laboratories!” Again, the rumbling growl of anger and frustration.

“I’m going to let you live, you and the rest of your fumble-footed fools,” the voice said and the sergeant started breathing again. “You can’t even defeat a bunch of *college students* and an old pug, much less capture a playboy inventor.”

The sergeant frowned. That wasn’t fair! Iron Man had—

“No, you’ll sweat, in case I change my mind . . . and I might. Meantime, we have to solve our money problems.” The voice changed, became less angry, quieter and more thoughtful. “Those mongrels, in their colorful Halloween costumes, have been closing down a lot of our fellow activists as well. That has been cutting off a very good money source because we now have fewer and fewer organizations to sell our advanced weaponry to. Only yesterday, one of the kingpin’s front organizations had to cancel an order for a hundred of our sleep guns.”

The voice was silent a moment and the sergeant listened intently. When you worked for AIM you learned to keep your ears and eyes open. Next to AIM the Mafia was a bunch of cub scouts. AIM didn’t just shoot you, stick you in a car trunk, and dispatch you to a wrecking yard to be compressed into a two-ton metal brick. No, AIM was more likely to send you to one of their genetic research labs and make you into a monster . . . or take your brain and put it into a—

“We need something special,” the voice said. “When those bantam generals come from their banana republics, or those beribboned Presidents-for-life come around looking for something to keep their populations under control, we need

something very fancy, very special to make a big hit. Same for the revolutionaries, the malcontents, the would-be world conquerors. Something very, very *special,* something that will restore their faith in AIM. Don't you agree?"

The sergeant jumped. "Y-yessir!"

"Do you have any suggestions?"

The sergeant's mouth worked but it didn't seem to be connected to his brain. The leader made a nasty noise. "Must I do *all* the thinking?"

Then he laughed. It wasn't a real laugh. It was more of a sneer done vocally. "Of *course,* I must do all the thinking! If I left it up to you morons AIM would be selling used cars!"

The sergeant's mouth worked. He tried to agree, but his mouth was too dry.

"What we need, Sergeant Kalin, is obvious. *Obvious!* Something that is fantastic, spectacular, with a *proven* war record! Something we could manufacture in the thousands—the millions! Each unit would be fantastically expensive, but once they were on the market none could refuse to buy! To *not* buy would be admitting defeat even before the war began!" The darkly sinister voice crackled ominously, with a kind of ghoulish humor.

"What we need, my bumbling warrior, is the armor that Iron Man wears! The armor that Tony Stark designed for that cursed Golden Avenger!"

The leader's voice dropped to a growl. "Golden Avenger! What egotism! What foolish vanity! When we obtain the secret of his armor we shall create them in *black,* to strike terror into the hearts of the little morons who dare resist!" The voice rose to a shrill cry of triumph. "AIM *will* be victorious!"

The sergeant gulped. He couldn't ask the questions that came to his mouth. Why hadn't the tame scientists of AIM created their own armor? Why hadn't his leader *himself*

discovered the secrets of Shellhead's suit? He was a great inventor in his own right, creating devices, gadgets, electronic magic. The sergeant was far too fearful to ask why his master had not produced something as good, if not better. The sergeant was no fool.

"And there will be no expense spared," the leader said. "We will even activate the Sleepers!"

The sergeant blinked. He had heard of the Sleepers, the secret agents planted in Stark International years before, as soon as SI rose to technological prominence. He didn't know who they were—he was not privy to that kind of information. He was in the action arm. He was a door smasher, a shooter, a destroyer, not a thinker.

But he couldn't help thinking. AIM had resources he knew nothing about. It made him proud to be associated with such a giant organization. It was a little like being an executive in Standard Oil or General Motors. Except executives in outfits like that didn't use concussion grenades—or fear for their lives if they screwed up. They didn't have to worry about being turned into some kind of protoplasmic slime in a secret underground laboratory—plus the fact that there was no retirement plan. Nevertheless in AIM you made your pile as you went along. It evened out.

The leader was talking again, but not to the sergeant. The frightened noncom could see television screens going on high above him, in a semicircle around the leader. Quickly, the sergeant averted his gaze. He caught a glimpse of his leader. He didn't like looking at the boss. It made him squeamish.

The leader was snapping orders. The new plan was being activated.

"Tony!"

It was Pepper’s voice coming from the kitchen. She ran out and threw her arms around him. “Boss! You’re all right!” She pulled back and looked at him. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Sure,” Tony Starked grinned. Pepper Potts Hogan, Happy’s wife, was a physically plain woman, but her personality shone through like a bright light. Everyone who knew her more than five minutes thought she was pretty attractive, really. After about twenty minutes you never thought of her as being plain. Some people are like that.

“I heard about it on the early news,” Pepper said, gesturing toward the television set.

“Yeah,” grumbled Happy as he came into their house behind Tony. “Usual misinformation and exaggeration.”

“Those college students,” Pepper said, still holding Tony’s arms. “Everyone they interviewed had a different story. Most never saw Iron Man, a few thought he *started* it, and—”

“Never mind,” Tony said, patting her arm and going over to a chair and plopping down. “I’ll send them a check to repair the roof of that auditorium, and maybe enough more for a new classroom or two.” He looked at Happy Hogan, who was his usual glum self, then back to Pepper. “What’s the itinerary for the rest of today and tomorrow?”

She squinted at the ceiling and brought her excellent memory into play. As Tony Stark’s secretary she was more of an executive than the standard, outer-office typist. “Tomorrow . . . dignitaries.”

“You make it sound like a rock group,” Tony said with a smile. “El Supremo and the Dignitaries. George Washington and the Revolutionaries.”

She went on as though he hadn’t said a word. “There’s Jim Downey from General Electronix. They’re after that molecular bonding patent, of course. Bentley Weinstock wants to manufacture that electronic printing gizmo.”

“Gizmo?” Happy said.

“That spin-off of Tony’s magnetic research, the thing that lets a writer or printer set type automatically, miles away.”

“We don’t need to see either one,” Tony said. “Have Weinstock see the lawyers, it’s okay by me. But no way is General Electronix getting that molecular bonding patent. SI is keeping that one.” He glanced at Happy. Both knew that the patent was one of the special secrets of the Iron Man’s armor. “What else?” he asked his secretary.

“The grand tour.”

Tony nodded. Frequent tours of the vast main Stark International plant were necessary. Stark had to keep in touch with all the various scientists and engineers working on a myriad of projects. Sometimes he had to solve some problem, sometimes he had to soothe ruffled feathers. Other times he had to stimulate, or even transfer people when they had gone stale. His greatest problem was to keep his scientists from feeling they were second-class. In the shadow of the accomplishments of Anthony Stark, many a person had felt inferior. Some days he had the delight of handing out raises and promotions, compliments and bonuses. Other days—less happy days—he had the distasteful task of “kicking rumps” and even firing people. Being the head of a company as diverse and as large as SI was not always a bed of roses.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes,” Pepper said. “Just as soon as Hilary gets here.”

“Hilary?” Tony asked. Then he understood. Pepper was incorrigible. Once she was married, she wanted Tony married, too. She had an endless list of “friends” whom she constantly tried to “fix up” with Tony.

“Hilary James. She’s really a lovely woman, intelligent and —”

“Pepper,” growled Happy ominously.

“Pepper, I don’t feel very hungry right now,” Tony said, getting up. “I’ll catch a bite at the office.” Stark’s private office and living quarters at Stark International had its own kitchen.

Disappointment swept over Pepper’s face. “But she’ll be here any minute now . . .”

Tony touched her arm. “Give up, Pep. See you in the morning.”

Pepper watched Tony leave. Her eyes were wet. Her husband put his arm around her. “Ease up on him, Pepper,” he said. “He’s got a lot o’ troubles right now.”

His freckle-faced wife nodded. “I know. But he *always* has problems. A good wife would help him with things like that. Oh, Happy . . .”

“Not now, Pepper honey. We got a full day tomorrow.”

“Yeah, the tour and the dignitaries.”

“And figuring out why AIM tried to put the snatch . . . or the hit . . . on Tony.”

Pepper’s eyes popped open and she stared up at her tough-looking husband. “Do you think they . . . ?”

Happy Hogan nodded. “They’re up to *somethin’,* darling.” *But what,* he wondered.

Four

From the windows of Tony’s penthouse atop the Special Housing and Recreational Building he could see all of his special kingdom. To the north he could see the main factory complex, where the devices designed by him or his staff were manufactured. Directly adjacent to his own penthouse-topped building was the Administration Building, where Pepper Hogan was waiting for him.

The monorail ran from the main entrance past Administration, with one branch going to the factory area, another past the all-important Research and Development Labs to the Solar Convertor area. Beyond it all, to the northeast, was the airfield, and the monorail arrowed to it. It was a vast empire, worth billions of dollars in potential, and having cost many millions to construct—and it was his.

Tony Stark *was* proud of what he had accomplished, but he was not egotistical about it. Stark International was a tool, not a self-serving edifice. Tools did things for you. Some tools worked better than others. A hammer was fine for driving nails, but not much good for painting. Pliers were

excellent for a number of things, but inefficient for driving nails. Stark knew that he had created an efficient tool, one responsive to his thinking and his needs—and the needs of his country.

But it was not all harsh efficiency. While Tony Stark did not know every one of his employees by face or name, he knew most of the several thousand who worked there. He knew them as human beings, as mothers and fathers, as members of the SI Bowling Team, or the Stark Chess Club. He had no intention of being the “benign employer” or a remote authority figure. He had only the desire to do what he wanted to do—and needed to do—in the best and most efficient manner. In the course of that he met and worked with a vast variety of people. Some he liked, some he didn’t, but he tried not to let his personal feelings affect the promotions or demotions, the assignment of work, or the many other factors he had to deal with.

Buzz.

Stark shook his head and pulled himself away from his musings. It was Pepper, reminding him—none too discreetly—that he was wanted. But Stark was not yet ready to go to work. Unhappy thoughts kept nagging at him.

Why had the AIM thugs come at him?

As far as he knew he was not immediately involved in any of their nefarious schemes. He hadn’t stumbled upon anything that stank of AIM, nor had his fellow Avengers. A call the previous night to the Avenger headquarters, followed by another to the Baxter Building, had verified that right *now* AIM was quiet.

“They’re up ta sumpin’, all right,” Ben Grimm had said in his gravelly voice. “They always are.”

“We’ll keep alert,” Captain America had promised him.

So why had they tried a kidnapping? Or had it been an attempted killing?

There was no answer. There was not yet enough information. Tony Stark sighed and turned away from the windows. Dressed in a dark business suit he dropped swiftly in his private elevator and stepped out into his private office. He thumbed the intercom and told Pepper he was in.

“Mister Sitwell is here, sir,” she said. Her voice was just a trifle chilly, Stark thought. Well, he’d run out on her dinner and her carefully invited blind date. She had a right.

“Send him in, please.”

Jasper Sitwell strode in, Mr. Efficiency at work. Blond, crew-cut in an age of full heads of hair, freckled and wearing a modern version of old-fashioned wireframed glasses, he was Stark International’s special liaison with SHIELD.

SHIELD: Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage Law-enforcement Division. The vast anti-crime, anti-evil organization headed by Nick Fury, that cigar-chomping, black-clad relic of World War II. The one-eyed former sergeant was a colonel now, and ran his tough group with a fist of steel . . . and there was no velvet glove on it.

“Sir,” Sitwell began, “I am extremely worried about this attack on you by those miscreants at AIM.”

Stark nodded and waved his hand to dismiss the problem. “I suppose you have tightened security and all that?”

“Naturally, sir,” Sitwell said. Stark sighed inwardly. Sitwell was good, but he *was* boring. He’d never quite gotten out of the straight-laced college fraternity cycle. He did everything by the book, even when there was no book, or when the book was outdated or out of print. He lived by the principle that there was a wrong way and a book way of doing everything. *Everything.* Stark tried not to think what his love life—if any—was like.

“You should never have been allowed to go to Benford University without a full prior security check *and* an adequate security force *in situ* well *before* you arrived.” He

shook his head. “If I hadn’t been away in a conference with Colonel Fury this would never have happened.”

“I approved the arrangements, Jasper,” Tony said. “You know I don’t like a lot of security men hanging around me.” Stark never knew when he might be forced to become Iron Man at a moment’s notice, and a lot of sharp-eyed security jocks would only get in the way.

Jasper Sitwell still shook his head. “I’m setting up a conference, sir. We are going to reevaluate both your personal security procedures *and* Stark International’s from the ground up.”

Stark nodded. It was to be expected. It wouldn’t do any harm to redesign the security methods. Frequent shake-ups were good. They kept the juices flowing—and they confused the enemy. And Mr. Jasper Sitwell had just the nit-picking mind to do it right.

“Anything else, Jasper?”

“Yes, sir, but it can wait until after the tour.”

Stark nodded and got up. Jasper followed him into the outer office, where they collected Happy Hogan. Their first stop was at the solar conversion plant at the southern edge of SI’s sprawling complex.

Iron Man’s suit had highly efficient solar cells for power, but they were far too costly for mass production. Here scientists labored to increase the efficiency of mass-produced solar cells. Solar power was, in Tony Stark’s opinion, the best and proper energy of the future. At their next stop plans for the outer-space use of these solar cells were shown to SI’s top man.

In the R and D division were multiple plans and intricate models for the first of the space colonies that Stark International hoped to soon build in orbit. Based upon the imaginative concepts of Gerald O’Neill these space colonies would someday become independent of Earth. They would

collect solar energy in immense, mile-square solar panels and beam the energy to collecting panels on Earth. Cheap energy, pollutionless energy would be the result.

In addition, the colonies—to be situated in one or another of the points between Earth and the moon where the gravitational pulls would be equalized, thus stabilizing the orbits—would be manufacturing centers. They would be able to construct, due to the lack of gravity, perfectly spherical ball bearings, crystals “grown” in perfect alignment, and many other items of commerce. The vacuum of space would be another manufacturing asset only now beginning to be understood. All this, Stark scientists were experimenting with, researching, investigating. In another part of the complex, agronomists were trying to find the optimum size for vegetables grown in tanks of nutrient—in space, heated and fed by the sun. Outer space was the next great frontier—and one that was limitless. Stark International—with contracts from NASA, and on its own—was going to be heavily involved.

As they rode the monorail toward the main factory area Stark looked at Happy Hogan sitting ahead of him. Dour, unsmiling, unswervingly loyal Harry Hogan, inevitably called “Happy” because of his manner and expression of pessimistic doom. As the monorail car hummed along, Stark was drawn back to the time he had met the ex-prizefighter. It had been a long time ago. His Iron Man costume was all gold then, still bulky and less efficient than now.

He had been more strongly into his playboy facet then—fast cars, fast women . . . and slow wine.

The Stark Special. What a beauty. The best engine on any track—sleek and fast . . .

The motor caught with a roar and Stark grinned. He let it idle back and pulled down his goggles. Then he zipped the special fire-resistant jump suit as Mike Logan, his mechanic,

bent toward him. The sleepy-eyed mechanic shouted over the noises of the racetrack.

“We thought you weren’t going to make it, boss!”

Tony smiled. He had been late, but it had been Iron Man business. He’d raced across country roads on Iron Man’s built-in, powered roller skates, just to get himself in the mood for the big race. Highway police had tried in vain to catch up, but the Golden Avenger had pulled away from them with ease. However, it had made him late. Stark just grinned.

“Everything set up?” he asked.

“With this new engine you ought to pass them other crates like they was standin’ still,” Logan said, the cigarette in his mouth bobbing with every word. “It’s gonna be a long enduro, boss. How do you feel about the grind?” A lot of people knew about Stark’s heart wound and some worried.

“I’ll put it this way, Mike . . . *Iron Man* couldn’t be in better shape!”

The mechanic nodded in relief and slapped the cowling. “Let’s roll it out,” he ordered the crew. At once two men began pushing the sleek race car. Racing machines don’t carry extra weight and starters are part of that unneeded weight. These cars are started up externally, once everything is ready. Every drop of gas is potentially important, especially so in long endurance contests such as the one about to begin.

Stark watched the starting lights. Everything was electronic these days, even starting “guns.”

Red.

The motor was purring beautifully. Stark did not look at any of the other drivers. They were all pros. They looked down on Tony Stark a bit—the rich boy buying his way into the big time. They ignored his record of wins and seconds, but liked his “stable” of models, actresses, and jet-set

beauties that appeared at all his races. But he was still the “amachoor,” the rich kid playing games.

Yellow.

The tenseness was building. Hands at the two and ten position. A quick look at the tachometer. The car was custom-built around him, as all professional race cars are. It fit snugly, but was comfortable. Everything was made to his body measurements—the size, shape, and position of the bucket seat; the distance of the gearshift; the pedals; everything. It was a mechanic sculpture, a different kind of metal suit than what Tony Stark sometimes wore.

Green.

Foot to the floor, slamming the head back. The car raced out, burning rubber, jockeying for position. Don Arrow shot ahead, into the lead position, a nifty bit of driving, but Stark was right behind. Bits of crud peppered the high-impact plastic windscreen, and on the curves in the winding dirt track thick clouds spattered against Stark’s windshield. At the first turn, Renaldo Garcia’s car pulled abreast, showering Stark with more clods. A big one hit his helmet, making his head ring, but as the curve straightened out and the lead cars came out of their four-wheel drift, Stark once again put the pedal to the metal.

He pulled ahead at once as the powerful motor was given its head. Stark grinned tightly, exulting in the feeling of speed and power.

“If I keep up this pace,” he thought, “I’ll not only win every lap, but set a new track record!”

The other cars were behind him. Don Arrow was trying hard to keep up, but his engine simply was not as powerful as the experimental new monster installed in the Stark Special.

Then the next curve was coming at him. It was sharp and not banked all that much. It was Killer Kurve, the place that

wiped out more drivers than any other. You had to be alert—going in and coming out. Some drivers went in perfectly, failed to hold their drift, and didn't come out. The much-repaired curve was proof of that.

Tony Stark stared through his dirt-spattered goggles at the vicious curve, feeling the rumbling thunder of his engine, estimating the exact moment to begin the drift.

Then a terrible pain knifed into his chest. It was an agonizing, squeezing pain that ripped mercilessly at him. In that fleeting moment Stark remembered he had forgotten to recharge his suit after his miles of high-speed racing across the highways. In his anxiety to get to the track he had simply forgotten.

And his forgetfulness was about to kill him.

He seemed frozen—unable to make his body work, to control the hurtling car, or to bring it expertly into the curve. There was not enough energy left in his chest plate, hidden beneath his flameproof jumper, to keep his heart pumping.

So this is death, he thought.

Will it hurt?

He almost laughed. *Will it hurt?*

No one comes back from the dead to tell you, not ever.

The car did not turn, not expertly, not at all. The pain that had paralyzed his body kept him frozen as the car smashed through the guardrail, through the wall, flipping high, shredding against the barrier and sending broken parts of itself flying in every direction.

All Stark thought was: at least no one will be hurt but me—and I'm a volunteer. The racetrack authorities don't let anyone watch in the vicinity of Killer Kurve.

The car flip-flopped once more, then crashed back to earth, skidding across the dirt, twisting and bending. The roar of the engine, sputtering and dying, was lost in the shriek of metal and rending of parts.

A different kind of pain slammed into Stark as the car came to a screaming halt within a cloud of dust. A part of the frame had bent, pinning him in and beneath the wrecked automobile. At once a fantasy came to him: in his Iron Man costume he could have risen immediately, ripping away the crippling metal, bending the frame, stepping out unharmed.

But he wasn't in his Iron Man suit, at least not in the powered part of it. His electric sinews and metal muscles were in the attaché case locked in the trunk of the car in which he had arrived.

The stink of spilled gasoline was in his nostrils. He heard the cries of the ground crew and the blurred boom of the loudspeakers. A siren was going somewhere. But with horrified eyes Stark saw that a little river of high-test gasoline was wandering through the dirt and dry grass . . . toward a small grass fire the wreck had started. If one met the other, there would be nothing that could save Anthony Stark from being cremated alive.

Nothing.

The first civilians to run up to the wreck stopped as someone pointed out the gasoline river and the smoke. Then they fought to get back through the crowd. No one had a taste for being part of a fireball.

No one except one man. Big, tough-looking, and wearing a loud sport jacket, he shouldered his way through the departing crowd and sized up the situation at once. He did not hesitate.

"Can't leave 'im there," he muttered as he raced across the dirt through the smoking shards of the expensive racing car.

"No! Go back!" Stark cried. "You can't help me—I'm pinned in here!"

“Big deal,” the man grumbled and bent his back. His red face grew redder as his muscles strained against the bent metal. Something gave way. “Now you’re unpinned,” the man said, reaching for him.

“The gas . . . the fire . . .”

“Yeah, yeah,” the big man said, tugging none too gently at Stark’s body. “Look, bub, I’m scared enough without any help from *you.* So let’s clam up and get *out* of here, huh?”

Stark’s suit caught on a projecting knife of metal but the big civilian ripped Stark away, half carrying him. Stark could hardly move, although the first paralysis from the pain had dissipated fairly quickly. His whole body was bruised and battered.

The stranger dragged Stark only a short distance before the gasoline reached the burning grass. The explosion sent shards of bent metal arcing everywhere. One bounced off the back of Stark’s rescuer as he protected him with his body.

“Too bad no bookie was around,” the stranger grumbled. “He would’ve given me ten-to-one I’d be strummin’ a harp now.”

Stark gasped out his next words. Although he could move, he was weak, and the pain in his chest continued. “I’ll pay you fifty times as much if you rush me to the nearest motel . . . lock . . . lock me alone in a room . . . and . . . and no questions asked.”

The stranger looked down at Stark, and his heavy brows knitted in concern. “Hey! Yer turnin’ pale as milk! Somethin’s ailin’ ya . . . and it ain’t just from the crack-up!”

“I *told* you . . .” His voice faded and unconsciousness almost overcame him. Everything seemed fogged at the edges. “Don’t . . . uhhh . . .” The pain increased. “Don’t ask quest . . . questions . . . Carry me to . . . to your car!”

Without another word the burly rescuer swept Stark into his arms and without even a grunt lifted him up and carried him toward the parking lot. Stark was only dimly aware of the people moving past, staring, eagereyed at the burning wreckage and the international playboy that had caused it.

“Wassa matter with him, huh?” someone asked, tugging at the stranger’s arm. “Drunk, huh? Stoned, maybe?”

One glare from the man’s dark eyes sent the questioner backing off. The strong man continued on, shouldering his way through the crowd, shouting at those in his way.

“Get outta the way there! Hurt man coming through! Move yer butts! Watch it, coming through!”

Stark was put into the front seat of a shabby convertible and they wasted no time. The car screeched out of the parking lot, past a waving policeman and an angry parking-lot attendant.

They tore into the traffic, horn blazing, and traffic parted for them. The big man at the wheel shot Stark a look. “Maybe I ain’t no Louis Pasteur . . . but ya don’t look like yer gonna make it, fella. Maybe we oughta call a Kildare!”

Stark lifted a weak hand in protest. “No! I . . . I can doctor . . . myself. Just get . . . get me to that room.”

Grumbling that he didn’t want no joker checking out in his car and about having to fill out all those forms, the rescuing stranger thought maybe a fast trip to the nearest hospital would be best. But Stark insisted, in a weakening voice, that a private room was all he wanted or needed.

The big man driving deftly through the traffic grunted. “Well, what the hell—every guy should be able to check out the way he wants.”

Stark was gasping for air now. I’ve got to hold out, he thought. Hold out long enough to cross that threshold . . . otherwise it’s not only Tony Stark’s checkout, but Iron Man’s as well.

They came to a noisy halt in front of the Holiday Inn, one that catered to the racers and their crews—and groupies—that patronized the nearby racetrack. Stark was helped from the car and when the stranger demanded his wallet, Stark did not protest. They went through the glass doors and up to the desk, being eyed the whole time by a disapproving clerk.

The big stranger slapped the wallet down and opened it up with one hand, holding Stark with the other arm. “What’s wrong with him?” the clerk asked.

“None o’ your biz, fella, just give us a room.”

“Single or double? We only have one suite left and—”

With a growl the big man reached across the desk and grabbed the clerk’s shirt and jacket, wadding them up in one massive hand and yanking him halfway across the desk. “Gimme the key to the nearest room, whether anyone’s in it or not!”

“Yuh-yuh-yessir!” The clerk reached back with a trembling hand and took a key from a box. The key danced nervously in his hand and he handed it over. Stark’s rescuer simply dropped the clerk and by the time he got to his feet and brushed back his hair there was no one in sight.

Stark’s wallet lay on the desk. There *was* a lot of money in it. American Express . . . the *gold* card . . . Mastercharge, Visa, Carte Blanche, Diners . . . Well, at least he isn’t a deadbeat, the clerk thought. But when he gets back I’m going to give him a piece of my mind! There are procedures for incoming guests. They are there for a reason; you can’t just *flaunt* them. Rules are *rules.* They keep us from being animals.

“No . . . must be . . . must be alone . . .”

Stark’s rescuer shrugged and went out, pulling the door shut behind him. Stark was already moving toward the

lamp. He had a hard time ripping open his flame suit. He simply ripped the buttons off the ordinary shirt under it, revealing the golden chest plate beneath. He reached down and unfastened the charging cord from its snug fitting and fell to his knees.

Stark almost blacked out. He had to make it to the wall socket . . . which was behind the bed table. The lamp, bolted to the table, did not topple as Stark jerked the furniture aside. The room went dark as Stark pulled out the plug. He had to feel for the socket in the dark. His hands were weak and trembling, the pain in his chest becoming almost overpowering.

Then the twin metal prongs sank into the socket. Stark could feel it at once. It was weak, but it was there, growing every second.

Electrical current. It's like adrenalin stimulating my heart back to normal, he thought. Stark lay between the beds, uncomfortable but grateful. The electricity flowed into the chest plate's electronics, giving them the muscle to keep him alive.

After several moments, Stark knew he was going to live. It was, to put it simply, a good feeling. "So I've cheated the undertaker again," he muttered aloud. Thanks to a grouchy stranger with more guts than brains. Stark made a vow to reward his nameless rescuer handsomely.

Then he lay there, soaking up the liberating electricity until every last battery was fully charged.

The big man in the sports jacket was pacing back and forth by the swimming pool when Stark came out. Stark saw him stop dead and just stare. Not much of an expression. Then the big man was walking toward the recently wrecked driver.

“Explain sumpin’ to me, Stark. Ya crawled into that room like ya were out for the count.” He gestured at Stark almost contemptuously. *“Now* you walk out alive and as strong as Sonny Liston. How come?”

Stark smiled at the bigger man’s outthrust jaw and demanding pose. “It’s a *mystery,* chum.” He aimed a thumb over his shoulder. “Come on into the lobby, there’s a bar there where we can talk.”

Suspiciously, the big man eyed Stark as he walked—slight limp, bruises, some minor cuts. About like a four-round prelim with some lefty that had twenty pounds on him. But he didn’t say anything.

They settled into a booth and Stark reached for his wallet. He looked embarrassed. “Oh . . . I thought I had my . . .”

“Wait a minute,” the man said and he departed quickly. In a couple of minutes he was back and tossed Stark’s billfold on the table. “I signed yer name to the charge ticket. It’s inside. Count yer money.”

But Stark just reached in and pulled out a check. “Name?” he said with a quizzical look at the man still standing in the aisle.

“Harry Hogan,” he replied, his face like stone. “Down at Stillman’s Gym they nicknamed me ‘Happy.’ Mostly ’cause no one’s ever caught me with a smile.” He said the last part with a faint echo of pride.

Stark took out a pen and started writing on the check. Hogan looked at what he was doing without expression. He took out a cigarette and lit it as Stark asked, “How come you gave up your ring career?”

“Because I was too successful,” Hogan said. “At *losin’,* that is! After I got a guy against the ropes I never had the heart to finish him off. So I gave it up.”

Stark said nothing; he merely handed the check to Hogan. The ex-pug’s eyes grew wide. “Hey! A check for *fifty*

thousand clams!” Then he glared past the check at Stark. “Is *that* all ya figger yer life is worth, Stark?”

Tony smiled. “Well, if you’re dissatisfied I’ll *double* the amount! After all, I wouldn’t *be* here if not for you.”

Hogan grunted, looking at the check. “Me . . . I’m *always* dissatisfied.” He tore the check in half, then in half again. He dropped the pieces in the ashtray as he sat down. “Forget about putting a price on yourself, hotshot . . . and don’t start that ‘eternally grateful’ bit. I didn’t save ya for no fee. It was . . . just reflex action.”

Stark spread his hands. “But surely you can *use* some money?”

“Mister,” Hogan said, fixing Stark with a stare from below his shaggy, scarred eyebrows. “What I can use is a nice steady job with three week’s vacation with pay, a good pension plan, an’ all kinds of fringe benefits.”

Stark stared at the glum Hogan as he thought: if I’m liable to black out suddenly, as I almost did today, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to hire a combination chauffeur and bodyguard—someone who has already proven his courage in handling difficult situations.

“Er . . . I could use a chauffeur, Happy. If you want it, the job’s yours.”

There was no change of expression on Happy’s dour countenance. *“Now* yer talkin’,” he said, lighting a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old one. “A nice, quiet, safe job—no broken noses, no knockout punches.” He looked at Stark with a dead-serious expression. “What kind of car do you have? I don’t like jalopies.”

Tony Stark smiled. “Well, I have, among others, a Rolls Royce Silver Cloud, a Caddy Eldorado, and a two-seater Jaguar convertible. They manage to get me where I’m going.”

“Mmm,” Happy Hogan said, blowing out a noxious cloud. “I had a hunch ya weren’t exactly starvin’.” He tapped out some ashes. “Well, those crates are okay for a start, I guess, except for the Caddy. They’re boats—handle like a pregnant hippo. I’ll getcha something right.”

“I’m glad you’re satisfied, Happy,” Stark said as he took a blank check out of his wallet again. “Now I’ll write you a check for ten grand, so you can get a few odds and ends to prepare for the job.”

Happy made a rumbling noise, but he didn’t tear up this check. Stark remembered that a few days later, in Manhattan, Happy was all decked out in a dark chauffeur’s uniform, stretched tightly across his broad shoulders. They were proceeding slowly through Fifth Avenue traffic, with Hogan making deprecating remarks on the efficiency of the big Cadillac.

“How do I reach yer plant?” Hogan asked. “All I know is that it’s in Flushing, New York.”

“That’s my *main* research center, Happy. I have other plants and R and D labs all over the world—one on each continent, actually.”

“That’s real impressive, boss, but it *still* don’t tell me where to head for *now!”*

“Proceed south on Grand Central Parkway. I’ll tell you which exit to turn off at.”

Happy nodded and Stark settled back, opening a briefcase. Not, however, his special attaché case, which was lying on the floor by his feet. This one contained business papers, and he busied himself with them, looking up now and again to give Happy directions.

At the plant, Happy noticed the heavy security system. Walking through the outer halls of the Administration Building, Tony took the time to introduce Happy to some of the security men.

One of the guards remembered Happy as a fighter and grinned. “If Hogan drives like I once seen him fight—you better be sure you use your seat belt, boss!”

Hogan took a step toward the guard and gathered up the front of his uniform in a meaty fist, while balling up the other. “Who asked *you,* big mouth? *You* I could flatten with my *pinky!”*

“Easy, Happy,” Stark said, coming between them and breaking Happy’s grip. “Your ring days are over . . . until after I introduce you to Pepper Potts, my secretary.” Happy gave him a suspicious look as the guard straightened his uniform and tried to look innocent. “You can fight all you want to with *her!* I do—regularly.”

Tony Stark strode on down the corridor, and Happy followed, after a glare in the direction of the guard. Happy caught up to his employer as they entered the outer office of Stark’s private office suite. Happy saw a huge painting on the wall and opened his eyes in surprise.

“Hey! Ain’t that Iron Man?”

“Yes,” Stark replied. “He . . . uh . . . happens to be a good friend of mine. Always dropping in when he’s in the neighborhood.” This was Stark’s standard reference to the Golden Avenger. Some people thought Stark was name dropping, but Tony knew that he must play up his “friendship” with Iron Man to explain the frequent appearances the crusader made. It alibied Iron Man’s sometimes too-coincidental appearances whenever Stark had to switch identities for some emergency.

There were times when Stark wished he could simply “come out of the closet” on this matter and let the world know. But he also knew the television and media people would never let him alone. There were also Iron Man groupies, publicity seekers, and other assorted crazies that would make Tony Stark’s life unbearable if it were known that he was Iron Man. So the secret had to remain just that.

Happy took a good look at the portrait. “Well, there’s one guy could have been heavyweight champ easy! He could beat Dempsey, Louis, Marciano, Liston, and *me,* all together, with one mitt strapped behind his back!”

Stark smiled as he took Happy’s arm to steer him into the next office. “I don’t think the Boxing Commission would approve the weight difference, Happy. Without power that suit of his is too heavy to move.”

Happy nodded reluctantly, eyeing the picture with admiration. He went with Stark into the office where the ex-pugilist saw a freckle-faced, rather mousy-looking woman with her red hair up in a librarian’s bun.

“Pepper, meet Harry ‘Happy’ Hogan. From now on he’ll be my private chauffeur.”

Pepper looked at Happy in something like horror. “Oh, no! With eligible bachelors as scarce around here as dinosaurs, you hire a battle-scarred ex-pug! It couldn’t be a Rock Hudson. No, he has to look like Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi rolled into one.”

Stark looked in surprise from one to the other. Both were having extreme reactions. Pepper was acting indignant, as though Stark should have consulted her . . . and Happy was looking thunderstruck. Thinking he’d better leave them alone to work out their differences, Stark continued on into his office. “Get Happy a security pass, will you, Pepper? Give him top priority, access to every plant.”

“What about the standard security clearance check?” she asked.

Stark grinned over his shoulder. “He already passed. Just do it, huh?”

“Yes, boss.”

Both Pepper and Happy watched until the door closed behind Stark’s back, then Happy picked up the conversation as if nothing had been said after Pepper’s first comment.

“Don’t pay any attention to my kisser, doll! Beneath this rough exterior beats a heart fulla love at first sight.” Happy moved closer, chauffeur’s hat in hand, a rather sappy expression on his rough-hewn face. “Ya know, you’re my type!”

Pepper glared at him as she moved stiffly to the ranks of filing cabinets. “Insults will get you nowhere, *Mister* Hogan.”

Happy looked even more shaken. “Are ya brushin’ me off? *Me,* Happy Hogan, who has finally found the dame of his dreams?”

Pepper yanked open the cabinet, then stopped to glare back at Hogan. She took in his muscular body, the cauliflower ears, the heavy, battered features. “My dear Mister Hogan,” she said in icy tones. *“Your* dream would only be my *nightmare!* In short, *you* wouldn’t be my type, even if you *were* my type!”

Happy’s expression turned to truculent glumness. “Okay, I get the picture.” He aimed a thumb at Stark’s door. “It’s *him,* Stark, who makes yer ticker go thump, thump, right?”

Pepper had her back to Happy. She shut the filing cabinet with a loud click. Her expression changed, softened and grew dreamy. She wasn’t even totally aware she was speaking aloud. “Right. Only he doesn’t know I’m alive, but someday he will . . .” She thought about his long string of beautiful women and how she was just the opposite, plain but sincere, honest, and helpful—just the right counterpoint for his wild ways. “. . . And then he’ll give up his actresses and debutantes . . . and I’ll become Mrs. Anthony Stark.”

Then she was aware she had spoken aloud and blushed as she hurried back to her desk, where she sat stiffly.

“How d’ya like that?” Hogan grumbled, looming over her as she rolled paper into her typewriter. “I flip over a doll and what happens? I get a *love triangle* on my hands!”

“The only triangle in this situation is your *head,* Mister Hogan! Which comes to a nice, sharp *point!* Now, excuse me, I have *work* to do!” Her fingers started drumming out a tattoo on the machine. Hogan stood helplessly by for a moment, then went over to collapse into a visitor’s chair.

Anthony Stark closed his office door completely. He sighed. Nothing was ever smooth—nothing. He heard Pepper give Happy the instructions for the security department, and then nothing more. Just the abrupt machine-gun sound of a typewriter.

Stark was brought back from his memories as the monorail car arrived at its destination. Tony sighed mentally as he got out. That had been a long time before. Hogan had discovered Stark’s secret and was now one of the very few people privileged to know his Iron Man identity. Pepper had gotten a face lift, but more importantly, had stopped thinking of herself as Plain Jane or Miss Efficiency. Now she only thought of herself as Pepper, the woman . . . and Pepper Potts Hogan, the wife of Happy.

A lot of H_2O has been transported under the vehicular crossing structure since then, Stark thought. They had shared many dangers—and many triumphs. They had all changed. Pepper was still the superlative right-hand person, but she had fallen into a habit—almost a compulsion—to get Tony settled in with a “good wife.”

Jasper Sitwell strode along with Tony as he went through the factory. “The GR-2 is ahead of schedule, but the vacuum-dust process is giving Quint some trouble on the Jupiter-Nine project. They can get a good pattern laid down in the vacuum chamber, and the—” Jasper’s voice droned on, explaining about the method by which high-quality printed circuits were constructed on small “chips,” each with a complex of electronics that made Iron Man’s original suit look like a Tinker Toy set.

They paused in their tour and were waiting for an elevator when Happy brought something up. “Look, boss, do ya think they *know,* ya know, *know?”*

Stark knew what his friend meant. Did AIM really know he was Iron Man, or did it have nothing to do with that part of his life? “It’s hard to say. My gut feeling is that they were after Tony Stark . . . But for what reason, I don’t know.”

“You know a lot, sir,” Sitwell said. “Or it could be a straight kidnapping.”

“For money?” Stark mused. “AIM’s aim is power . . . control . . . But of course, money could help them with that.” The elevator arrived and they entered.

“They could be after some of yer secrets for the ransom,” Hogan suggested.

Stark nodded. “I’ve thought of that, but they may be playing a more subtle game.”

“Whatcha gonna do?” Happy asked.

“Wait,” Stark said. The elevator door hissed shut.

Five

Carlton Bond sat up very straight as Tony Stark entered the office part of the Jupiter-Nine section. The beaming Quint met Stark with a two-handed handshake. He smiled at Sitwell and Hogan and he escorted Stark over to the drafting table where Carlton Bond sat.

The tall, balding, pipe-smoking Quint introduced Stark to Bond. “Mister Stark, this is Carlton Bond, a new man here. He was with Associated Electrochem until two years ago, then we were lucky enough to get him.”

“How do you do, Bond?” Stark said, shaking his hand. Bond was pudgy, pale, and had a receding hairline. But looks were not the reason Stark hired anyone. His handshake was limp and moist, but Stark had long ago gotten used to the sweaty palms of employees frightened to meet the Big Boss in person.

“Sir.”

“What’s the problem here?”

Bond pointed to the charts pinned to the drawing board. “When we lay down the overlapping lines there’s leakage through, from one layer to another. Not a lot, just enough to cause trouble if the insulation isn’t just perfect.”

“You put down a layer of insulation material between each application?” The microelectronic “chips” were the future of electronics. With them, cheap, efficient computers could be made in vast numbers. With cheap computers society could make better and more efficient machines. If Stark International was going to compete in the world of business they had to manufacture perfect chips.

“Right,” Bond replied. “Correct alignment, everything.” Each layer was laid down by a process done in a vacuum; between each layer was a special insulating material and the layers were connected at holes left in the insulation. All automatic. Original circuit diagrams were done on huge charts several feet square, then photographically reduced to almost microscopic size and reproduced on tiny plastic circles and squares.

Stark thumbed through the blueprints, his dark eyes searching carefully as the others stood by. “There,” Stark said at last. His finger pointed to a number. “Someone transposed a number. The insulation layer is exactly one half as thick as it should be. It might be enough to let leakage through at load points.”

Bond looked embarrassed. “Sorry, boss, I didn’t catch it.”

“Neither did anyone else,” Stark said, slapping his arm. “So don’t feel alone.” He looked at Quint. “Try another run and check. That’s probably the cause, but run a test.”

“Right.” Quint looked relieved. It had been his ultimate responsibility. Bond *should* have caught the goof, but it was his, Quint’s, final responsibility. He didn’t think he looked too good in Stark’s eyes just then.

Stark and his entourage exited the office and Stark immediately forgot the problem. But not Quint's forgetting to check and double-check.

Carlton Bond watched Stark leave, his pale, pudgy face without expression. There was a strange flicker deep in his light blue eyes, then it disappeared.

"She's lovely," Pepper said earnestly to Stark, who fidgeted uneasily in his office chair. "She's an actress from Hollywood who—"

"I thought you were against actresses," Stark said with a smile.

"This one is different. She's a belly-dancing mechanic as well as an actress, and she writes—"

"Wait a minute! *A belly-dancing mechanic?"*

"Well, she's taken a lot of belly-dancing lessons from Diane Webber, and she didn't want to be ripped off on her car repairs so she took this course in auto mechanics."

"A belly-dancing mechanic."

"Who acts," Pepper reminded him with a smile.

"Who acts. This one, my dear Pepper, is one blind date I might just keep. What is the name of this paragon?"

"Sharman. Sharman DiVono." Pepper beamed. "She'll be in town tonight and you have reservations at The Four Seasons for eight. She'll meet you there."

Stark nodded, smiling. "Miss Efficiency strikes again."

"Betcha," Pepper said as she left the office.

Carlton Bond nodded as his boss, Quint, said good night. "I'll just finish this run," Bond said, tapping out numbers on the desk computer, "then I'll go home."

The moment Quint left, Bond stopped. He cleared the computer and pulled a sheet of paper from beneath the pile.

He had completed the calculations much earlier and had been going through the motions. He placed the final notation in the file, closed it, stuffed it into the *Action* basket on Quint's desk, and walked quickly to the door.

The corridor lights had gone to half-power as an energy-saving procedure. In an hour they would go off completely. Bond pulled a flashlight from his pocket, checked it, then stuck it back in. He started walking down the corridor toward a special red door. His heart was pounding.

Two years of waiting. Working and waiting, playing a part, thinking he had been forgotten. But AIM never forgot. He knew he had been activated for a very important job. And he knew what the job was. Once past the red door, it wouldn't be hard.

But getting past the door's electronic security system was going to be very, very difficult, or impossible, if the small black box taped to his calf didn't work.

It had to work. Everything was riding on this. His AIM indoctrinator, the one who had recruited him at Associated Electrochem and got him moved to SI, had given him seductive visions of palatial homes, bosomy maids trained to do his bidding, jet planes to exotic ports . . .

If only half of it comes true, he thought. To have my own bowling alley, my own bar with tap beer, to see the envy in the eyes of Jimmy and Ed, to see that wife of mine act impressed for once, just once. It would all be worth it.

They'd never know, any of them. He'd have some story. A daily double at the track, excellent stock-market moves, anything. No one questioned money. And he'd have money, the indoctrination guy had promised it—more money than he could possibly want. "Just do the job and one day you'll hear someone on the phone say something about sapphires and shamrocks. You say something about hamburgers."

"It's that simple?" Bond had asked.

“Well, no. You see, that is just the recognition code, so you’ll know you are talking to the right person.”

“It won’t be you?”

“I don’t know who it will be, Bond, but that’s what they will say. They may say it this way or that, but . . . what will they say?”

“Something about sapphires and shamrocks. And I’ll mention cheeseburgers.”

“Hamburgers.”

“Hamburgers, right. Then what?”

“Then they’ll tell you what to do.”

And someone had—a rough voice, waking him up the night before. Monique had been annoyed, but he had told her it was business. He’d lain there in the dark for hours afterward, thinking.

Monique. The name didn’t fit her—too glamorous, like a European starlet. No, she was more the Agnes or Muriel or Bunny type. No, not Bunny; that had other connotations, and they didn’t fit either.

But soon, *soon,* it would all change. Maybe he’d have someone that really fitted the name Monique—or Angelique. Maybe Yvette or Adriana.

Soon.

Just as soon as he got through the red door marked *No Admittance to Unauthorized Personnel.*

Six

“Hello, you’re Tony Stark.”

Stark turned at the sound of her voice. “Yes, you must be . . .”

“Sharman. Sharman DiVono.”

Stark took a good look. A striking beauty; a great mass of black hair, silver Egyptian earrings, and the biggest dark eyes he had ever seen in his life.

“Pepper set it up, remember?” She looked at him quizzically. “You all right?”

“Uh, yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t expect . . . I mean . . . well, shall we sit down?” He lifted a finger and the maitre d’hôtel jumped to unhook the velvet rope.

As they were being seated in the posh restaurant the young actress said, “Wonder how I recognized you?”

“Pepper probably supplied you with a dossier going back to the crib.”

“No,” she laughed, “but I remembered seeing you in the papers. You look a *little* like Errol Flynn, that mustache and all, and I’m a great fan of his.”

Tony didn’t know what to say. The girl’s expression seemed mercurial; it changed constantly, subtly, and boldly: from sixteen-year-old innocent to sexy wanton to all-knowing matriarch to fresh-faced smarty. The waiter handed them the tasseled menus.

“Uh-oh,” the actress said.

“What is it, something you don’t like?” Stark asked.

Sharman flicked the tassel with her finger. “Someone told me a tassel on a menu adds two bucks to the bill—each.”

Stark laughed. “Well, don’t worry about that.”

“Why, am I tax deductible?”

He shook his head. “No, and neither is the wine. Henri?” The wine steward was at their table in a moment.

Sharman whistled silently. “I thought that kind of service happened only in movies.” Henri raised his eyebrows delicately at her, but Stark smiled.

“At these prices you get service.” He ordered a light white wine and said they would order dinner in a little while. “All right, let’s see *your* dossier, Ms. DiVono. What brings you to the Big Apple from the Big Orange?”

She shrugged. “A part. Three days’ shooting playing the girl friend of a Mafia mobster. Then four more on Universal’s back lot. It’s a start.”

“Do you belly dance in this, or fix any cars?”

She laughed. “She told you!”

“The most intriguing part. A belly-dancing mechanic was the way Pepper put it. And how do you know my Pepper, anyway?”

“Mutual friend. I met her the last time you came out to Los Angeles with her. We hit it right off, but I don’t think she

likes actresses very much."

Tony smiled. "No, she thinks they are egotistical, self-centered, untrustworthy, and much too attractive."

"Oh, boy," Sharman said. "People don't believe you are really feeling anything; they think you fake everything for practice."

The wine came at that moment and Tony saluted her. "Well, here's to mechanical belly dancing, or anything else that's shaking loose."

Sharman rolled her big eyes toward the ceiling, but smiled. "Forgive him, Errol."

The black box, untaped from Bond's calf, was held against the shiny lock. It hummed and clicked as the microcomputer within decoded the electronic lock. Bond knew that even the miraculous little box would not have stood a chance against the variable lock combination if, earlier in the day, he had not been standing nearby when one of the trusted employees had punched out the code. Bond had seen the first two numbers and had coded them into the black box as he sat in the men's john.

Buzz. Click-click-click, *click.*

The door popped open a fraction. Bond shoved it open and slipped through. The lights were out and he carefully closed the door before he flipped on the lights.

So far, so good.

He went at once down the long corridor created by the large, locked filing cabinets. He needed the "A" section. "A" for Armor.

Tony Stark had a difficult time keeping his face from showing the surprise he felt.

"Yes, Iron Man is my really *big* craze," Sharman said, twirling the dessert wine in her glass. The dishes had been

cleared away. There was a bowl of fruit and a dish of assorted cheeses left.

“Iron Man is so . . .” She looked up, trying to think of the proper words. *“Masculine,”* she said. “In a very traditional way. When you’ve been raised as I was . . . in a traditional, patriarchal way . . . someone like Iron Man is . . . well, he gives me a sense of security.”

“But you don’t know him.” Stark caught himself, and added, “Do you?”

“No, but I’ve been following his career for years. He’s . . .” Her big eyes grew thoughtful. “He’s powerful, and that power is really sexy. He’s a man of mystery. Who is he? What’s he like? Is he good-looking? He seems to be intelligent, but maybe he’s terribly scarred or something.”

“He isn’t.”

She smiled at him. “You’ve seen him? I mean, without the armor?”

Stark wasn’t exactly certain what he could or should tell. “Well, I know he isn’t, um, unattractive. But you’re a young woman, a liberated woman making her way in the world, yet you seem to be attracted to him precisely because he *isn’t . . .”* Stark paused. “Or am I wrong?”

“No,” she smiled. “I never said I had to be consistent. But he gives me a sense of security, just knowing he’s there, fighting for us, protecting us.”

“I’ll . . . I’ll tell him.”

Her smile grew playful. “I hoped you would.” She leaned on the table and clasped her beringed fingers. “Tell me what he’s like.”

“I . . .” Stark stopped. She was only interested in him because he knew Iron Man! What would she do or say or feel if she knew I *was* Iron Man? Ruefully, it was a scene Tony Stark had encountered many times before—women liking him because he was rich or knew the famous, not

because he was ol’ Tony Stark. His face grew bleak, but before he could speak, Sharman broke in.

“I hope you don’t think I’m just trying to get to him through you. But I’ve never known anyone who knew him. Oh, a couple of finks who *said* they did. I’m so curious. I mean, on this picture there’s an actor that’s worked with Bogart and Wayne and Katie Hepburn. I ask *him* about *them* all the time.”

“Oh,” Stark said, and felt better. He’d felt that way himself sometimes, especially around Thor. Knowing an actual Norse *god* was pretty fantastic. He kept wanting to ask what it was like, but he couldn’t—at least not yet. Maybe the next time he would.

“Maybe if I met Iron Man I’d ask him what Tony Stark was like,” she said happily.

“Well, uh . . .” This blind date was a definitely superior experience to those Pepper had arranged previously. Stark thought briefly about the intriguing Madame Masque. That was Iron Man . . . Tonight he was Tony Stark. “What would you like to know?”

Carlton Bond’s pale eyes lit up. His black box had decoded the filing cabinets’ defenses, too, but it had taken a long time. He was soaked in fear sweat, afraid of setting off some hidden alarm. But now he held in his freckled hands the file marked *Armor, IM* and rubber-stamped *Most Secret.*

The jackpot! Visions of kidney-shaped swimming pools populated by bikini-clad women swam through his mind. No Monique, no drafting tables, nobody looking through him as though he were not there. His biggest problems from now on would be choosing which of his companions to honor that night, what fork to use, what wine to order, whether to have a bowling ball custom-made or just get the standard best-that-money-can-buy.

Eagerly, Bond turned and started to go. Only he forgot to close the drawer. His jacket caught on the corner, ripping, and sending him off balance. He stumbled and clutched at the smooth face of the other filing cabinets, his fingers screeching along the surface. He fell awkwardly, the papers in the file spilling in a white river along the floor.

Bond scrambled to his feet, slipped on a drawing marked *Right Glove, Schematic,* and fell heavily. The wind was knocked out of him and he lay gasping. When he staggered to his feet he thumped his head against the still unclosed drawer. And when he bent over to pick up the spilled file he kicked more of it along the corridor.

His flashlight fell from his pocket, the lens breaking. He staggered toward the exit, slipped on the broken glass, and fell against a cabinet. An alarm went off.

Bond stared around him in fright. He had to get away! But he needed a diversion. Quickly he ran back to the “A” file and yanked out some papers. Fumbling, he pulled out a cigarette lighter and set fire to the papers. Then he threw the burning wad back into the drawer, gathered up the spilled file, and ran for the door.

The flames spurted up from the top drawer, catching fire to the ceiling. He ran.

In the basement a hand reached for the Main Water Control valve. It struggled with the valve, which had not been turned off in years, and closed it.

Upstairs, as Bond raced down the hall, stuffing the Armor file under his shirt, the sprinkler system was activated. It fountained out water for a few seconds, then rapidly died back, to drip ineffectually as the flames spread.

In the Security Room the startled guards noted the area and its security rating. “Better inform Mister Stark,” the captain said. A sergeant thumbed a beeper alarm.

In Manhattan there was a soft beep-beep-beep in Tony Stark's pocket. He looked calm, but his mind was racing. They wouldn't call him unless it was very important. From the pattern of the beeps—three beeps repeated at intervals—he knew it was Stark International rather than the Averagers headquarters calling. He looked across at Sharman DiVono, who seemed to have heard the beeping.

She raised her eyebrows. "Business?"

Stark nodded. He didn't want to go; he wanted to understand better the appeal the enigmatic Iron Man had over him, a living, flesh-and-blood person. He found it faintly amusing to be in conflict with himself, but annoying, too. "I'm afraid so. I'll have to make a call."

"Fire in the priority filing area, Mister Stark," the security captain said. "Looks pretty bad."

Stark drummed his fingers on the wall by the phone. "How did it start?"

"Something's funny, chief. It started *inside* the primary filing room."

"Uh-oh," Stark said. "Any alarm?"

"Not until the fire started. Someone or something got through the circuits."

"I'll be right there. I'll . . . I'll tell Iron Man, too."

"Right, chief. We can use him. We got every fire engine in Flushing on the way here."

Stark hung up and thought for a second, then walked quickly back to his table. "There's a fire in the high-security area of my plant. I'm sorry, I've got to go."

Sharman spread her hands expressively; her many silver rings glittered in the candlelight. "It's lonely at the top."

He gave her a quick smile and put some money on the table. "I'll have Happy see you get home."

“How will you get out there?”

“I . . . I’ll get a cab. Happy’s downstairs. He’s the glum-looking one.”

She smiled and waved him away. “Go, before there’s nothing left.”

Stark flashed a smile and took the elevator to the ground floor. He found Happy Hogan talking to the other chauffeurs. As he retrieved his attaché case he told Happy about Sharman. The ex-fighter wanted to go to the plant, but Stark insisted he get her to her hotel all right.

“Then come out. But I’m taking the fast route.”

“Alley’s over there, boss.” Stark nodded and took off at a trot.

As he stripped off his expensive Tony Stark clothing he thought, I ruin more clothes this way. Last time I left them behind they got stolen. That never happens to the other superheroes. Or else they’re too embarrassed to mention it.

Then . . .

Snap. Click. The Iron Man costume unfolded, snapped into place, joined with his ever present breastplate. He activated his boot-jets, flamed up out of the narrow alley, and headed toward Flushing. He hoped he’d be there in time to help out.

But who had gotten into his private, special files?

He knew *why*—there was a billion-dollar treasure of scientific information there. It had a duplicate in the special private computer, but still . . . if both sides had a certain piece of information, that information might be turned against one of them, or rendered useless by the exposure. It was important to Tony Stark, to Stark International *and* to Iron Man that that file room stay inviolate. Only a handful of trusted people had access. It couldn’t be one of them, he thought.

Or could it?

Iron Man flew in an arc toward Flushing, whistling through the murky night air of downtown Manhattan.

Carlton Bond flattened himself against the wall as the guards thumped down the main corridor. When they were past he trotted quickly toward the fire exit. It would be all right. I was working late, he'd say. I heard all the commotion and just took off. Better safe than sorry.

Bond smiled thinly, almost smug in his triumph. He'd done it! He'd penetrated the great Tony Stark's innermost sanctum and gotten out with the prize of prizes! Iron Man's armor plans!

Incredible! He was the Raffles of his time, the super secret agent, better than his namesake, that fictional 007. He'd done it!

The fire door crashed open, setting off another alarm, but Bond was already running across the neatly trimmed grass toward the very special transportation that he was certain would be just beyond the double wire fence.

It had to be there. Everything else the mysterious "sapphires and shamrocks" voice had told him had come true. The black box worked, the plans had been there.

The flyer *had* to be there.

Seven

Iron Man saw the flames clearly while he was still in the air. The northeast wing of the Administration Building was on fire. He could see fire engines screaming through the deserted streets. When he got closer, he saw that SI's own fire department was hard at work. He came to a landing near the smoke-marked security captain.

"Oh! Iron Man! My god, I never get used to your coming down out of the sky like that!"

"Fill me in. Stark asked me to come ahead."

"Right. Well, the fire got started *inside* them secret files of his. Inside, mind you, and no sign of forced entry, the boys said. But the fire got a good start because the water was turned off."

"Turned *off?"*

The captain nodded. "Some foul-up, I guess. Maybe some check and they forgot to turn it back on, I dunno. It'd be caught on the next fire marshal's checkup, but . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

“Doesn’t sound like coincidence to me,” Iron Man said, looking at the rippling flames.

A fireman ran out of the billowing smoke, up to the fire chief nearby. “Chief! There’s two people, maybe three, up on the fourth floor!”

The chief cursed. “What in blue blazes were they doing up there, working late?”

“I guess. I heard ’em yellin’ and o’ course, the moment the fire alarm started the elevators went to the ground floor and locked. And the stairway on this end is full o’ smoke.”

“Why don’t they use the other one?”

The fireman pointed. “Fire. It’s broken through to the fourth. They’re cut off. That sprinkler system not workin’ really gave it one blast of a start.”

“Well, Iron Man,” the security captain said, turning. But Iron Man wasn’t there.

The fire chief pointed suddenly. “Look! He’s going right into the fire!”

Using his flying boot-jets, Iron Man flew straight into the billowing smoke. Special lenses flipped into place and he could see a little better, but still not clearly. He heard the screams above the crackling of the fire. He went right through one wall, into the stairwell, and jetted up to the fourth floor.

He found two secretaries and a security guard. One secretary was conscious, and she was on her knees, coughing. Whirling, Iron Man punched a wide hole in the outer wall. Then he scooped up the two unconscious people, one under each arm. “Put your arms around my neck!” he shouted.

Coughing, the young woman did. Stark stood and jetted out the hole he had made. But with a feeling of horror he felt the hands around his neck loosen their grip and the

woman on his back fall free, just as they were going out through the wrecked wall.

With both hands full, Iron Man could do nothing. He looked over his shoulder as he sped down toward a safe area. The young secretary was caught on a projecting length of broken concrete-reinforcing rod, severed when Iron Man had created the makeshift escape hatch. She hung limply, caught by her dress—and the dress was ripping.

The fire, almost directly below, was breaking through another area. Flames were licking up toward the unconscious woman.

Iron Man deposited the two limp bodies on the grass near the parking lot and spun around at full jet, racing back like an arrow. He knew it was going to be close. He had to calculate it with pinpoint accuracy. There would be no time to brake, pick her off, and turn around.

As Iron Man shot through the opening, he plucked the limp body from the iron bar, ripping her dress half off, but flying right back into the smoke trapped in the interior. Behind him, there was a roar as the flame puffed up in a great fireball, searing and half-melting the steel rod from which the woman had just been removed.

Iron Man flipped over, protecting the unconscious female as well as he could, and used his boot-jets to curve around toward the stairs. One blast of his repulsor rays, aimed by his outstretched hand, showed the way through the smoke. Iron Man raced for the stairs as the fourth floor fire caught behind him.

But the stairwell was also now filled with flames. Iron Man knew that without his burden he could have simply flown through the flames. Now he was trapped. There was only one way to go: up.

Iron Man crashed through the ceiling, using his back and holding the dead weight of the young woman away from

harm. The fifth floor was relatively free of flames, though it was murky with smoke. Iron Man had tipped over a desk when he crashed through.

The Armored Avenger strode across to the windows and threw a chair through them. Carefully cradling the unconscious woman, he flew out to deposit her on the grass.

But as Iron Man left the building he saw a strange sight. From just beyond the buildings across the street, outside the western edge of SI, a strange machine was lifting.

An AIM flyer!

Iron Man put the woman down next to the paramedics who were already working on the other smoke inhalation victims. Then he powered his boot-jets and shot into the air.

The AIM flyer was already a dwindling dot. If Iron Man hadn't been able to drop infrared filters over his eyes and locate the black flyer by its heat emissions he could have easily lost it.

Iron Man started the chase.

In AIM headquarters, the leader watched the action funneled to him by a video camera mounted on the flyer. He made a nasty, grumbling noise. Then he made a decision. His finger poised over a red button.

Iron Man caught up to the flyer somewhere over Briarwood. He could see the frightened face of the pilot and the terrified face of its passenger. The passenger looked familiar. Where had Iron Man—or Tony Stark—seen him before?

But events were moving too fast. Iron Man came in at top speed, his gloved hands out. Just as he grabbed the rear cockpit of the AIM flyer he remembered who the passenger was: one of Quint's people.

Then the finger in the AIM headquarters pressed the red button.

The explosion disintegrated the flyer. Light blossomed over Briarwood. Shards of flaming wreckage showered down on the sleeping community.

Iron Man was thrown back, as if by a giant hand. He was dazed, but not seriously hurt. His armor had protected him, but he was badly shaken. He came out of his fall and watched as the bits and pieces fell over a mile-wide area. He saw the local fire station's lights go on.

Then he started back toward Stark International. There was still a great deal to find out about all this.

Jasper Sitwell was frowning in disapproval at the billowing smoke. The television people were here, and he had approved their entry, but assigned a security man to watch each one.

"Nothing good will come of this," he said in annoyance. "The fire insurance is sky high *now,* with all that's happened around here. God only knows what *this* will do to us."

The security captain nodded in reassurance. In some ways it was better to stay in the good graces of Sitwell than Stark himself. Stark was not always around, and when he was, he was often closeted away in one of his labs or shops, tinkering like mad. But Sitwell never missed a thing. He always appreciated efficiency and to him the "book" was everything. The security captain knew which side of the bread had butter on it. He may have been a bit confused about the *kind* of bread, but he knew margarine when he saw it.

"Yessir," he said to Sitwell, nodding in unison.

"Who's that?" Sitwell said, pointing.

"Sir?"

“That person over there, that woman, what’s she doing there?”

“I dunno, sir; maybe she’s one of those that Iron Man rescued.”

“No, no, they’re off to the hospital. That’s . . . that’s Gafford, isn’t it? The woman in Research?”

“Yes, sir, I think it is.”

“Hey!” Sitwell called out. The woman ignored him, walking quickly toward the east, toward the dome of the R and D center. “Hey, you, Gafford! Wait a minute!”

She kept walking, yet Sitwell was certain she had heard him. It wasn’t that noisy. He started after her. She looked over her shoulder and suddenly began to run. She pulled away from Sitwell almost at once, jumping the spaghettilike fire hoses and racing off into the dark. Jasper, frowning, followed.

What the blazes was going on here tonight? Gafford had been with the company for years and years, going back almost to the beginning. Good, steady worker. No problems before. Now why was she acting like a sneak thief?

Sitwell stopped in the darkness, straining his ears for a sound. He heard a brief tap-tap-tap of shoes somewhere toward the special storage sheds to the north of the Research and Development Labs. A lot of one-of-a-kind things were stored there, some obsolete, some abandoned prototypes, some immensely valuable. Sitwell started running.

Iron Man came down next to the security captain, who jumped. “Holy—! Oh, hi, Iron Man. I . . . uh . . . hey, you did a great job there, but you sure didn’t do Administration any good.”

“People are more important than buildings, Baker. Where’s Mister Sitwell?”

The security chief pointed. “He went that way. Saw some chick from Research he wanted to talk to.”

“Oh.” Sitwell’s private life was none of his business, Iron Man thought. But what was someone from Research doing here at this time of night? Iron Man turned to look toward the R and D complex.

Jasper Sitwell shouted out, “Hey! You’re not allowed in there!” The woman, Gafford, was shoving open the door to Bay Twelve. That was where the Hornet was berthed, a ground-fire vehicle Stark had developed back when he was industriously developing weapons for the Viet Nam war. It had been equipped with a great variety of experimental destructive weapons. It was a flying fortress with enormous firepower. The door was supposed to be both locked and electronically sealed. Something—or someone—very special had gotten through. The doors were sliding back. The woman was running in. Sitwell sprinted ahead, his fists pounding the air on either side of his torso.

He rounded the bay’s doors and hurtled himself into the shed. But he was too late. The running lights were on. The jets were thundering, sending dust and grit flying, lifting the camouflaged war craft into the air. As the machine moved out, Jasper attempted to get aboard the craft but Gafford swerved it close to the doorjamb and Sitwell was knocked off.

Jasper fell to the concrete, gasping with pain, and saw the craft continue on through, make a neat turn on its bottom jets, then rise above the building, and fly out of sight.

He wondered how the hell a woman, not involved in the development of this craft, knew how to fly the Hornet like that?

Eight

Iron Man saw the craft rise above the storage sheds. What in blazes was *happening* tonight?

His thoughts didn't stop his immediate response. The Hornet prototype was supposed to be mothballed. It wasn't. Something was wrong. Nothing wrong with *your* powers of deduction, Iron Man, he thought. Better late than never.

For the second time that night Iron Man was in pursuit of a fast flyer. Only this one was one of his and infinitely more destructive than any AIM aircraft. The Hornet was a war machine, born and bred to destroy. Iron Man snapped in his infrared filter and soared after the fleeing craft.

Suddenly there was a stream of red dots coming at him. *Tracers!* But they didn't bother Iron Man—he was, however, wondering who had armed the vessel. If the regulation fifty-caliber machine guns were loaded, was the other far more deadly armament also active? *That* made Iron Man nervous. *He* had designed all the experimental weapons and he had

never been known to shirk when it came to making an efficient weapon.

The machine guns, guided by heat-seeking radar, pinged off Iron Man's armor. He knew he couldn't be seriously hurt, but there was always the freak accident. Besides, it was annoying. So he started evasion tactics. Swooping and rising, he effectively kept ahead of the deadly tracers. There were only so many slugs the guns had aboard. Eventually they would run dry. Iron Man hoped he'd be aboard before the pilot started using some of the other weaponry on him.

He wasn't.

A repulsor beam hit him a glancing blow, sending him spinning off to the side. That one hurt. But it kept him from being nailed by a second blast. Iron Man aimed his own repulsors at the craft but he was still too far away to be effective. The Hornet's repulsors were powered by the war craft's great engines.

Blam! Iron Man was hit, and went tumbling through the air. He had enough presence to cut off his boot-jets, to keep him from twirling around erratically. He shook his head to clear it, then started again after the fleeing Hornet. It had a good lead on him now. *Who was flying it?*

ZZZat!

The ion gun fried the air next to Iron Man's head. Had it connected, it would have *dis*connected all the synapses of his brain. Effectively, he would either have been killed, or have lost every memory, and all instincts. He'd have become an imbecile—instantly.

What the blazes was *that* doing aboard? It hadn't even been part of the original Hornet armament. Someone had stolen it from the dead-storage area, to which it had been assigned, it being too horrible a weapon and illegal in war, according to the Geneva Convention.

ZZZat!

Another close call—too close. Iron Man made an even more erratic move, but that only put him farther behind.

The machine guns had fallen silent. The ion gun flashed from time to time, but never as close as before. They settled into a grim chase.

They were over New Jersey now, heading southwest. Stark was less worried about parts of the Hornet falling on sleeping people here. It was mostly industrial wasteland below. He activated his emergency-speed jets and flashed ahead.

He almost caught the pilot asleep. But the ion gun sizzled the air at very close range, making Iron Man dizzy. For a moment, he wondered what he was doing there in the night sky, racing along . . . Then he remembered and continued his sprint straight at the Hornet.

Blam!

A repulsor ray caught him at close range.

Blackness.

Iron Man came back to consciousness, falling through the air. He turned his head and looked down. There was a factory right under him. *Right* under him.

Iron Man's head was spinning. A combination of the ion-gun effects and the immense blast of the repulsor ray had addled his head for a moment. He tried to think in order to trigger the sensitive brain-wave pickups and activate the boot-jets.

Only nothing happened.

Falling, Iron Man twisted a foot and looked up at his boot. Nothing wrong. It had to be in the circuitry. He tried again.

Nothing.

And he was still falling. Already he was below the level of an immense smokestack. Then he thought, really *thought,* "Activate!"

The boot-jets flamed on and Iron Man twisted to level off his flight—and went right through the hundred-foot brick smokestack at the twenty-foot level.

The smokestack was still doing its slow motion fall when Iron Man zoomed along, dodging through the factories at the second-floor level. He had thought of a plan.

First, he had to test the connections between his brain and the suit. Forty-five degrees up. The suit responded. Level off, right turn, left turn—everything worked. It wasn't the suit, it was him, his brain. The ion blast had rattled him more than he wanted to admit. A man's reality was his mind and his memories. If they weren't there, or he couldn't trust them, he wasn't himself—literally.

Now: catch the Hornet and find out who is flying it and what they are up to.

Iron Man raced at top speed after the faint dot of the Hornet. He rose up to a height over the ship and slowly drew abreast of it, analyzing its defenses. It had been designed for a war where the good guys had total aerial superiority. He had placed all the weaponry to be effective toward the side or down at the ground. Coming in from the top would be his only choice.

Iron Man smiled thinly. If it was daytime he could come in out of the sun, just like a World War I movie. You can't send a kid up in a crate like that. They didn't *have* crates like the Hornet. Not even the U.S. Army had a crate like that because Stark had mothballed the prototype when it was obvious they didn't need it. Enough destruction was being let loose by the available forces.

He came in from the top, coming almost straight down, his fists out, ready to strike.

Only the pilot had thought of the ship's weakness, too.

Iron Man was met with a repulsor blast at the closest range yet. *This time* when he regained consciousness he

was underwater.

The suit's automatic defenses had gone into effect. He wouldn't have drowned, he'd have just suffocated when his air supply ran out. He was deep in the slime of one of New Jersey's polluted lakes. Disgustedly, he blasted out, fountaining up into the night sky and heading back toward Stark International.

Let's face it, he thought, I've been outmaneuvered and outfought. The only consolation is that I designed the weapons for the other side, he told himself.

He felt even worse when he found that the hard-fighting pilot of the Hornet had been a woman; then, astonished that it had apparently been Marla Gafford, from Research.

"Jasper, what is going *on* tonight?"

"Iron Man . . . ah, I regret to inform you that the plans for your armor were stolen from the files."

"No, they weren't, Jasper. I chased that AIM flyer and it blew up over Briarwood somewhere."

"Uh-huh," Jasper said. "And while all the noise and alarms were going off *here,* someone broke the code on the computer and siphoned off the plans from *there."* He looked darkly in the direction of the departed Hornet. "And that someone was Marla Gafford."

Iron Man let out a sigh. "The first man was just a diversion."

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"That AIM—!" He turned away angrily, not wanting to see the fire being put down in the Administration wing. "What in the name of humanity is that godforsaken bunch up to?"

"Sir," Jasper said, stepping close. "Why don't we take a little trip up to the SHIELD helicarrier and talk to Colonel Fury?" He whispered the next sentence after looking around carefully. "Colonel Fury has some sleeper agents himself. In AIM."

“All right, Jasper. Get a helicopter ready and give Fury a call.”

“I should check with Mr. Stark, sir, as soon as he arrives.”

“No time,” Iron Man said. “I’ll scout around, see if I can pick up any clues, and I’ll meet you.”

“Yes, sir,” Jasper said politely, but his eyes looked shrewdly after Iron Man as he strode off. “I’ll have SHIELD give you a buzz on the present coordinates of the helicarrier.” Iron Man waved in response.

There’s *something* about that man that confuses me, Jasper thought. His relationship with Anthony Stark, for one. If it wasn’t a matter of medical record about Stark’s bad heart, I’d *swear* he and Iron Man were the same person, yet . . .

With a disgusted shake of his head, Jasper Sitwell set off to arrange the rendezvous with the mighty SHIELD helicarrier. The crackling of the fire and the clang of still-arriving fire engines made the area very noisy. But before anything else, Jasper Sitwell had to devise a quick new code for the computer files, something to be a stopgap for the leak until a better—and hopefully secure—code could be devised.

Nine

The SHIELD helicarrier was a master achievement, a billion-dollar flying fortress and laboratory. It came west, from over rural Pennsylvania, to meet Sitwell’s jet helicopter over New Jersey. Almost at the same time, Iron Man’s crimson- and gold-form was detected streaking through the late-night skies by the ever-vigilant guardians of the airborne command post.

Iron Man came to a halt on the landing deck next to Jasper’s grounded chopper and the two men went below decks together. Iron Man strode ahead, his armored feet making a clanging rhythm on the metal flooring. He knew right where to go—the command center.

“So we’ve got to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, huh?” Nick Fury said, shifting his cigar stump from one side of his mouth to the other.

Iron Man said nothing in reply, but strode on past him to a large telemap, with small, moving lights indicating the location of the helicarrier’s aircraft. “That’s right,” Fury said, taking out his cigar only long enough to spit into an old-

fashioned brass spittoon. “Soon as Jasper here called, I sent out half of the pilots on patrol.”

Iron Man turned and took a long look at his old companion-in-arms. Dressed in his usual black, strung with equipment belts and weapons, he was—as always—combat ready. Also, as always, he was unshaven. His excuse varied, but it was usually that he didn’t have time. That excuse people could believe, for SHIELD was a twenty-four-hour organization, ready to go and fight wherever and whenever needed.

He wore the same eye patch, Iron Man noted, covering an eye lost in service in World War II, when he had been the toughest of infantry noncoms. But now he was an officer, a colonel, and one of the toughest and most skilled fighters Iron Man had ever known. Behind the impassive golden mask, Tony Stark smiled. He knew one thing: he never wanted Nick Fury after *him!*

“Made some calls, too,” Fury said, throwing himself into a metal chair bolted to the deck. “Called in a few favors, collected a little intelligence about our adversaries in good ol’ AIM.” Fury chuckled roughly and repeated the word, “Adversaries.” He took out his cigar butt and looked at it critically, then stuck it back in. “Dirty no-good back-stabbin’ freaks, that’s what they are.”

“We know how you feel, Nick,” Iron Man said. “What’s the intelligence?”

“AIM’s in trouble. And we’re the cause,” he added with a leer. “SHIELD, you, The Avengers, the common citizen who won’t go for one of their hypes or cons. But mostly us, the action arm. We’ve been smashing up their operations wherever we find them. And we’ve been hurting the finks—first and second generation, both. Not only actual AIM operations, but other criminal setups, outfits that have been buying equipment from them. Even small-time operators,

three- and four-man gangs that buy plans from them to rob banks or rip off some computer-run outfit."

"They broke the security code on Stark International's secret data file," Jasper Sitwell said. "I've put a temporary Langley-Ten puzzle code on the computer," he said to Iron Man. "Tell Mister Stark, will you, if you see him first?"

"Right," Iron Man said. "Sounds like AIM is into a lot of things."

Fury nodded, puffing on his cigar. "The whole ball o' wax: plans, operations, fencing stolen goods—*and* stolen ideas—everything. But still, we've been hurtin' them bad." He looked hard at Iron Man. "I figure they needed something big, a really hot item, something to get them ahead, pay the bills, as it were; something to bring in *big* money."

"The armor plans," Sitwell breathed.

"The plans . . . or the iron suits," Fury said. "If AIM controls the deal, if they keep the plans, then they can control not only the number, but who gets them. They can jack up the price if they wanna. Looks like you're going to have a lot of opposition, Iron Man."

But Iron Man didn't seem to be worried. He was very still, obviously thinking, so Sitwell spoke. "Getting something as complex and as big as a production line for suits like Iron Man's won't be easy. It could take a couple of years. More, if we harass them. We should try to anticipate where they might set up production facilities. Central or South America, maybe."

"I heard AIM has a stranglehold on at least one banana republic and another one—one of them new nations—over in Africa. They could always bribe politicians in some European country, I suppose, hide things away." He chewed at the inside of his mouth a moment. "Just like hitting the ball-bearing factories in Germany during the big war. Didn't have an effect immediately, but pretty soon everything

ground to a rusty halt. Yeah, I agree. We try to figure out where *we'd* put up an iron suit factory and then—"

"Don't bother," said Iron Man, coming out of his musings.

"What d'ya mean?" Fury demanded. "You know something we don't. Some place, maybe, where these dudes might set up?"

"They won't. Not with those plans. They're dummies."

Sitwell looked shocked. "False information in *our* data bank?"

Iron Man nodded. "Only Tony Stark and I know where the *real* plans are, and they are safe. But we both thought that someday someone would go after the specifications and designs. So we went to the trouble of making up some really good-looking fakes. They fooled you, didn't they?" he said to Sitwell.

Jasper looked discomforted. "Sir, I am not supposed to . . . I mean, I have no need to know, and I—"

"Oh, come on, Jasper," Iron Man said in a light tone. "You're curious. Well, did they pass inspection?"

Sitwell flushed. "Yes, sir, they . . . they seemed quite accurate . . . from what I knew. You must remember that the data bank is part of my responsibility and—"

"Yeah, yeah," Nick Fury interrupted. "You an' those yo-yos got some phonies. How long before they find out they were taken?"

Iron Man shrugged. "Depends. An ordinary engineer might be fooled for weeks, at least until he tried to make a prototype. The suit just wouldn't function *well.* It would have . . . flaws."

"But what if whoever ripped off your plans was no ordinary engineer, what then?" Fury snapped.

"Then . . . perhaps very soon. What they stole from SI would make, *maybe,* a good Tin Man from Oz. But whoever is running AIM's engineering section might—"

“Forget it. You know how they run that bunch o’ creeps—from the top down. And at the top is Modok.”

Jasper Sitwell grew pale. Modok was one of the most enduring adversaries Iron Man or any of them had ever faced. He was utterly ruthless and hated *everyone.* They were in big trouble.

Marla Gafford stood in the spotlight, trying to conceal her impatience and her fear. In the darkness before her, up in the circle of television monitors she could see her monstrous master scanning through the computer printouts.

It was a thick file. The famous, powered suit was very complex. There were pages of specifications, diagrams, construction procedures, electronics plans, mechanical operations, lists, and still more plans. She had worked feverishly at a computer terminal after using the electronic code-breaking instrument AIM had given her. She had heard the fire alarm go off and had smiled: Modok had suggested she turn off the water supply, just in case. The computer had taken *ages* to print out the long specifications for Iron Man’s supersecret suit, even in its fast-printing mode. Now she was waiting for praise . . . and for a reward.

She hated looking up at the monstrous supreme scientist of Advanced Idea Mechanics. Just looking at him made her squeamish. He was—literally and actually—the head of AIM. He was almost all head, with a body that seemed trivial by comparison. The body existed only as a support mechanism for the grotesque cranium. Even then it was not enough: a complex, motorized chair, self-propelled and armed, kept him alive.

A glance up at Modok and she could see the myriad buttons and dials, the snouts of weapons built into the rocket chair. She could also see the rig of metal bands that supported the heavy head. Modok’s face was in proportion to his head—it was a yard wide. An ugly face: bulging eyes

over an evil mouth filled with teeth; shaggy, lank hair; pale skin; and above all, an expression of perpetual anger and abiding evil.

Yet it was to this paragon of evil she had vowed loyalty. Years before, she had been recruited by AIM, tested and found amenable to their uses for her. She had been planted within Stark International with great care. Her advance through GM, GE, Westinghouse, Electronix-West, and Evanier Electronics had been carefully guided. At the right time she had come up with breakthrough discoveries—all courtesy of AIM captive scientists. Stark International had felt good about employing her, and she had proven a productive employee, even without any aid from AIM.

It had started with greed—and that most useless of emotions: envy.

She had seen her peers advance while she had not, in those early years. At first she blamed it on the fact that she was a woman, but when other women gained prestige, better jobs, academic approval, and industrial merit, she quietly discarded that argument. She began to realize she was good—but not *very* good. She was stalemated.

Then someone she *knew* was not as good as *she* was, got a certain sought-after position at Evanier Electronics. That was the straw that broke the back of her control. She raged around her apartment, smashing dishes, pounding walls, crying, and screaming. *It wasn't fair!*

Perhaps AIM had been watching; perhaps their timing had just been fortunate. In any case, they approached her, obliquely, and she was just bitter enough to bite. They had dangled a vision before her: money, power, glory . . . and the chance for revenge against those who had passed her over.

She *had* advanced. She had felt a growing sense of power. Warned against that most deadly of poisons for a sleeper agent—the feeling of being forgotten and useless—she had

reacted in just the opposite manner: by feeling she was being saved for something extraordinarily important.

And if anything was important, it was Iron Man's fabulous suit. And she, Marla Gafford, had gotten it for her employer. Her back straightened; she awaited suitable commendation.

She saw the baleful, hate-filled eyes of Modok turn from the thick sheaf of plans to her. She trembled involuntarily. He can't help it, she told herself. He just *looks* monstrous. But a secret little voice deep within her ran through her consciousness like a bug running for safety: Modok *is* evil.

"This is useless to me," Modok said, his voice shrill and angry. *"Useless!"*

"But, Modok, I-I-I got it right from the computer files, with the lock breaker your men gave me, I didn't—"

"Fool!" The woman cringed under the booming voice. There were figures moving in the shadows, helmeted AIM minions. "It is a clever imitation. Only the designer could have done it and only Modok could have found the flaws." His small hand cascaded the printouts down from his lofty chair. They fell noisily, folding and bending until they ended in an untidy pile at the bottom of the column upon which Modok had enthroned himself.

"But these plans are *useless* to me!" Modok roared. "I'd build something only slightly better than a walking scarecrow, if I followed these plans—and a damned *expensive* scarecrow!"

"Master, I assure you, I—"

There was a guttural roar from Modok and an abrupt motion of one of his deformed arms. Helmeted figures ran in and seized Marla's arms, ignoring her scream of protest.

"No! It's not my fault! I didn't know, how could I?"

"Room 101," Modok said, a flicker of anticipation in his eyes.

The uniformed men dragged Marla away. “No, please, give me another chance! I won’t fail you again! Next time, I’ll—”

The door slid closed behind them and there was silence in the dark arena. Modok was alone. He savored his rage for a long moment, adding it like fuel to the fire that burned eternally within him. It was a fire that did not require refueling—it burned with a bright flame at all times, but sometimes a bit of fuel gave it shape.

Modok hated.

He hated with an all-consuming hatred, for there was nothing he loved—nothing.

If he could not have their love and admiration, then he would have their fear and respect. He did not want their pity, but he would have their lives. He would have power.

Power.

The power to destroy a thing is the absolute power over it, and he had that power and would have more. At first, power had been necessary just to survive, but as he gained power he found out something certain men and women had known—that power was addictive. Now he had to have power for its own sake—power to control.

In contrast, Modok believed not that power corrupted, but that power ennobled. And absolute power ennobled absolutely.

Riches and power—but if a choice were to be made, the sensible, prudent man would choose power, for the *lack* of power also corrupts.

Power was freedom. Power was never having to say, “Yes, sir” to *anyone.* Powerlessness was an obscene state. Modok was determined never to be without power again.

Power came in all sizes. Sometimes, as Modok secretly knew, the small powers were very gratifying. Such as the power to kill an insect.

His hand pushed a switch and a television screen flickered to life. Room 101, that very special room with that very special number, a number he had taken from Orwell's *1984.* The room where you met whatever it was that frightened you most.

Spiders, snakes, pain, disfigurement, rats, electric shock, surgical experimentation, sexual perversion, humiliation, dismemberment, loss of motion control, and whatever else it took to break someone.

Anyone could be broken, given the right tools and the right information. Some would take longer, some would break almost at once. He shrewdly guessed that Marla Gafford would not take long.

He moved the zoom lens in closer. The torturers of Room 101 were skilled. They knew who was watching from the other end of the many cameras. They always made a show of it; not too fast, not too slow—and they enjoyed their work.

Modok stared fixedly at the screen as the men in Room 101 began to find out, from dossier and painful experimentation, just what it took to break Marla Gafford.

They always broke them before they killed them.

It was more fun that way.

They *did* enjoy their work.

Ten

Modok’s mind wandered. The torturers were beginning to repeat themselves, in an attempt to prolong the awful agony of the once-human wretch in their clutches.

The woman had failed. It had not been her fault. How could she have known? But failure was not to be condoned at AIM. If one were allowed to get away with failure, anyone could. Criminal activities could not afford failure. The forces of what they so nobly and egotistically-called “Good” could afford to fail now and again; not “Evil.”

She had to be made an example. The woman was no longer important. She had served her purpose. There was no way she could be put back into normal society. She wasn’t good enough to retain as a tame scientist. She had a larger purpose: instruction.

There was a slight twinge in Modok’s mind. There had been a time when he, too, had been but a tool—a thing to be used, a pawn.

They had needed a volunteer. An *intelligent* volunteer, not one of the robotlike humans that AIM used as hands and muscles. They had come and grabbed him from his laboratory in the research department of Advanced Idea Mechanics—just took him. They left his notes, pencil, and calculator on the workbench; left his terminal glowing, his ham sandwich uneaten.

He hadn't volunteered. He knew the monstrous work in genetic engineering the Scientist Supreme was engaged in. It was nothing he wanted to even think about.

But the Scientist Supreme needed an intelligent volunteer. The computer had been given the specifications by an impatient overlord. Three names had come forth; he was the closest.

He had seen the great, slanting, cylindrical test chamber, its thick observation door gaping, and he struggled against the hardened muscles of the guards.

"No! No! I've done nothing! *Nothing!"*

"Silence!" a guard snarled, trying to keep the operation moving smoothly. "The Supreme One needs a volunteer—and you are he!"

"Place him in the alteration chamber," ordered the Scientist Supreme in a chill voice.

Modok had stared at the bald, bearded man in horror. "No! *No!"* he pleaded, but they ignored him, tying his thrashing arms and lifting him up. "Don't! You can't—! You *mustn't—!"*

It shamed Modok now to think how he had begged, how piteously he had pleaded, the spittle coming from his mouth, his eyes bulging with fear. The Scientist Supreme had been utterly cold.

"Your cries are useless. Your fate is sealed!"

They put him into the chamber, dumping him unceremoniously, then slamming and dogging down the heavy door. The hirelings had moved away quickly, but the

victim’s moans and pleas were heard over a loudspeaker until the Scientist Supreme cut him off.

“You are a *nothing,”* he informed the unfortunate “volunteer.” “A nobody. One of the countless, nameless agents of AIM!” The scientist’s fingers had moved expertly across the faces of several banks of controls, setting, switching, adjusting. “But, when we have finished . . .” His finger stabbed down at a control.

The alteration chamber was bathed in red lights. From the window set into the hatch everyone could see the figure of the test subject go rigid, then collapse limply. The Scientist Supreme looked closely at a television monitor that showed a close-up of his subject, bathed in red light.

“You will be a living, breathing *computer,* with the greatest brain on earth!” Already there were changes, anticipated by the scientist from his earlier animal subjects. They had had to be destroyed, but this one would not be. “You will be the deadliest weapon in our arsenal,” he whispered fiercely to the contorting features of the unconscious man.

For more than twenty-four hours the experiment went on. The red light changed to blue, to yellow, back to red. The changes were soon evident. After a few hours, even the tough soldiers of the AIM army did not care to look. What had once been a man was now something horrible.

“It is done!” exulted the Scientist Supreme as the automatic machinery stopped. To one of his white-coated helpers he said, “We have created the *ultimate* intelligence!”

The scientist moved across the laboratory and stared directly into the alteration chamber, his assistant at his side. The Scientist Supreme looked down with triumph in his eyes. “We’ll call him . . . Modok . . . since he is a Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing.” He looked for approval from his assistant and saw the disgust on the man’s face as he stared into the chamber.

“But . . . *look* at him,” the assistant said in a shaky voice. “He has become a *freak,* an inhuman monstrosity!”

The Scientist Supreme’s voice grew very cold. “But he has served his purpose . . . or will, if he lives. I imagine I must construct some sort of locomotion for him. A sort of wheelchair, perhaps.”

The immense head and infantile body within the chamber stirred. The scientist’s assistant saw the dawning realization in Modok’s grotesque face.

“What *am* I?” Modok demanded. “What have you *done* to me?” His eyes had looked up at them, filled with both hate and fear. *“What have you done?”*

The Scientist Supreme answered crisply, coldly. “You are now Modok. You are the most powerful brain alive! With you serving the cause of AIM *nothing* can ever stop us!”

They had taken him out, too physically weak to even support his own head. A special chair had been made and he had been strapped into it. The Man in the Iron Chair—only there were no Three Musketeers to rescue him, to turn him back into the ordinary man he had once been. There was no *escape*—there was only one thing to do: triumph.

The Scientist Supreme had made one fatal error, one which Modok’s invigorated brain quickly spotted. “They made me stronger than they know!” he realized. “I have the power to mentally destroy them *all!* Therefore it is *they* who shall serve Modok . . . and those who refuse shall die.”

Modok remembered with fond nostalgia how he had destroyed the Scientist Supreme with the first of many brain blasts. Those who failed to swear allegiance at once were also killed. Within an hour he had assumed command of the forces of AIM. Advanced Idea Mechanics had never been the same.

Onward and upward. Modok’s features contorted in what could have been a smile. He had had his triumphs . . . and

his defeats. The ill-chosen lot that called themselves superheroes had made his life miserable at times. He had barely escaped with his life more than once. The United States Army, Navy, Marines, FBI, and CIA were nothing against him—gnats. The British commandos, the Israeli strike forces, the Russian tank corps—bugs.

But always it was Captain America, Iron Man, and their brightly costumed cohorts that defeated him. He, Modok, possessed the most brilliant intelligence that had ever been seen on Earth. There was no doubt of that in his mind. He was the Scientist Supreme, the Engineer of Excellence, the Master of Men. He gritted his teeth, as wide as piano keys, and let his hatred and loathing build.

Captain America—that GI retread cryogenically transported decades beyond his time—he is my "favorite" enemy, he and Iron Man. And I shall use one to destroy the other. With the secret of Iron Man's supersuit, I shall send battalions of armored minions against the Avenger Mansion. None shall escape. *None.*

The conquering of the United States would be secondary. The conquest of the world would easily follow. Armies of human robots—brainwashed and retrained—in Iron Man's armor would sweep across the world. Fleets of aerial carriers would spill them out in endless streams. Washington, New York, Chicago, London, Bonn, Moscow, Rome, Cairo, Tokyo, Peking—they would all bow to Modok. They would crush one another trying to be the first to pay tribute. They would idolize him, praise him, fear him—but never love him.

Modok struck a blow at the control board. The screen with the sight of the torturers taking down the remains of Marla Gafford was blotted out.

World conquest was a disease. Doctor Doom had it, Modok knew, but not even *his* superarmor could stand up to *fleets* of Iron Men. He, too, would join the rush to declare Modok

“Master of the World”—a god, perhaps; the greatest mind the world had ever seen.

Yes, godhood by acclamation would be just about right.

For now, anyway.

“Master?”

“Eh?” Modok lifted his immense head to stare at the quavering figure at the foot of the column. “Yes, Jerek?”

“Master, the foreign buyers are here.”

“Send them in.”

The servant bowed out and soon four important-looking men entered. They were dressed in the ordinary uniform for businessmen—conservative blue, white shirt, polished shoes, and dark tie. But each item was handcrafted, expensive, and carefully selected. Expert tailors had hidden, as well as they could, the signs of corpulence and corporate dissolution. Savile Row tailors, used to Texas millionaires and Arabian billionaires, had dressed them perfectly.

But the perfect fittings could not hide what they were from Modok. He knew them, knew others like them. Greedy men, men without scruples or ideals, nickle-and-dime world dominators.

“What can I do for you?” he boomed from his special chair atop the thick column. The height of his chair was psychologically selected for maximum effect—both on his visitors and on himself. He *liked* looking down at humans. It made them even more like insects.

The man called Salvadore stepped forward. There was no sign of fear on his face. Excellent poker player, Modok thought, but the delicate sensors implanted in the floor picked up his heartbeat and respiration and transferred these findings to small screens hidden from the view of anyone on the floor.

He is afraid, Modok thought with satisfaction. Excellent.

“The weapons, your . . . your excellency?”

He will one day pay for that pause, Modok thought. “I shall have the weapons you ordered at the time agreed upon,” Modok said in a cold voice.

“I . . . I do not think you will,” Salvadore said.

Dodd and Solomon nodded quickly, nervously. The Oriental remained silent.

Anger thickened Modok’s voice, but he held himself in check. He needed these men . . . now. He needed their money. It was a very large amount. “And why do you think I shall not be able to deliver?” The chill anger in his voice made the Oriental run the pointed tip of his tongue over his dry, wrinkled lips.

Dodd spoke nervously. “It’s Stark, that Tony Stark. It’s on the telly. I thought you might have seen it,” he finished lamely.

“No,” Modok answered. “I was . . . was watching another show. What is it that the eminent Anthony Stark has done?”

Dodd looked at Salvadore and they both looked at Solomon, who swallowed and spoke up in a high voice. “Stark International is . . .”

“Go *on,”* Dodd said in a whisper.

“Stark is going to put the plans for the Iron Man suit up for bid on Friday.”

The news hit Modok like a mind blast, but he let none of it show on his impassively ugly features. “Yes? And what has this to do with our deal?” The four men exchanged worried looks. “I . . . and not Tony Stark . . . will deliver the suits for bidding as scheduled.”

“The . . . the *suits,* not the plans?” Solomon asked.

“You said the *plans!”* Dodd protested.

“I have decided to retain control of the plans. I will offer the armor to the highest bidders . . . plural, not singular . . .

at the specified time."

"But you said—" Dodd began.

"Silence!" Modok thundered. He pointed down at them. "You *listen* to me. The plans were bait, and you were the catch. Now the rules change, for I am the one who makes the rules. I will sell suits, manufactured by me from the plans of Tony Stark, to the highest bidders."

"But with suits like that, a small army could—" Dodd said.

"—conquer any country that—" Salvadore cried.

"You lied!" Solomon shouted.

Modok ignored the accusations. "I would think it in your interest to cooperate. Whoever gets a sufficient number of suits *first* has a certain edge, shall we say?"

The Oriental stepped forward, bowed, and then spoke in a thin voice. "Has the honored Modok seen the television announcement?"

Modok stared at him for a few moments. The Oriental seemed less cowed than the others, and he represented a considerable market. "No, I have not."

Modok turned at once to his controls, activating a video tape-recorder bank that taped all the major networks. He ran it back until he recognized Tony Stark on the screen.

It was a press conference, held in the auditorium of Stark International. The picture showed Stark, in a dark jacket and white turtleneck sweater, as he entered the room, followed by his secretary, Sitwell, and some others Modok recognized from the thick SI file. The television announcer was saying, "Today, in an unexpected news conference called at the ultra-secret Stark International headquarters, playboy Tony Stark made a startling statement."

The screen cut to a close-up of Tony Stark, who was reading from a prepared statement. "Today I have sent cables to the leaders of forty-nine nations and nineteen multinational corporations, asking them to have authorized

representatives here, at Stark International, for an auction to be held this Friday." He looked up into the glare of the television lights. "I am putting up for bid the powered suit made famous by my friend Iron Man."

There was a murmur that drowned out some of his next words and Modok strained to hear. "—the suit you have seen over the years employed by that individual known popularly as Iron Man has been in various stages of development. You have all seen its evolution, I'm sure." Over his next few words was a collage of shots—some made by professionals, some by amateurs—of Iron Man in action.

"All scientists make tests and conduct field trials. I think you will agree that Iron Man's armor has passed those tests. I consider the powered suit sufficiently developed to offer it for sale . . . under certain carefully selective conditions, which have all been made clear to the prospective customers. I am a businessman, first and foremost. My company exists to make a profit, as well as to serve the needs of our country." There was a rising murmur, but Stark put up his hand. "The *suit* alone is for sale, *not* the weapons system contained within. It is the suit that people want, not the weapons." He smiled. "I do not think all my customers will be power-hungry would-be world conquerors. With minor adaptations, offered as options, the suit made popular by my friend Iron Man could be used on the ocean floor . . . perhaps to do underwater archaeology, to hunt for oil or mineral deposits, treasure, or to *farm* the seabed. It can stand pressures impossible for existing suits and still function at optimum."

Tony paused, then looked around as he enumerated other possible nonmilitary uses of the famous armor. "Outer space . . . exploration, colonization, erecting solar energy-collection structures. Mining . . . the suit's immense strength would be a great aid here, and lessen the fear of tunnel failure. Construction . . . rescue operations . . ." He hurried

on quickly, explaining other points, but they cut the sound and the television reporter was giving his views on what this meant.

Modok knew what it meant, and cut off the channel with a slap. He turned to glare down at the foreign buyers, but they seemed to have gained some confidence.

“You’ve got to give buyers what they want,” Solomon said.

“You said you could get us the Iron Man’s plans,” Dodd said. “Then you switched and the best we could get was the suits.” He waved a hand at the television screen. “All right, mate, that’s what we can get from Stark—direct, with no worries about being illegal.”

“Yeah,” Salvadore said, raising a fist. “If Stark will sell to us . . . or our agents . . . direct, *and* guarantee its condition and function—”

“And it looks like he will,” Dodd butted in. “He’s like us, a businessman. If the price is right—and it will be, I assure you—he’ll sell.”

“And we’ll buy,” Solomon added.

“So, honored Modok,” the Oriental said, “perhaps at another time we might do business again, eh?” He bowed. The other men were already almost out. The Oriental paused at the door and bowed again, then left.

They had barely escaped alive. Modok’s finger had been poised over a deadly, red button. But to kill them would be only a momentary pleasure and a lasting annoyance. He’d have to retrain—i.e. intimidate—another set. That would take time. He needed money soon, so the fastest deal was the best deal.

He needed something to make him feel better. He turned to a screen and pressed a button. At once a man came hurrying into the room seen on the screen. He was both frightened and proud.

“Master Modok! An honor, sir, an *honor!*”

The man’s face changed as Modok gave him an order. “Oh, no, please, master . . .”

“Do as you are told!” The fierceness in Modok’s voice wilted the man’s resolve. He turned and left the room, coming back with the others. Modok watched as they obeyed him. It did not make him feel very much better, but it changed *their* lives forever.

Eleven

“Ya gotta let me do it, Boss,” Happy Hogan said. He and Tony Stark had been arguing for ten minutes. “I can handle it. I’ve doubled for ya before.”

“Those were emergencies, Hap.”

“So is this.”

“I won’t let you risk your life, Happy,” Tony said firmly. “You’re my friend, now what kind of friend would—”

“Boss, Boss, ya hired me as yer chauffeur *and* yer bodyguard, remember? I still got muscles. I work out. I can stand anything.” The ex-fighter shrugged and exposed both his palms. “Besides, Iron Man will be followin’ me, right?”

Tony sighed. Happy’s suggestion had merit. Dangerous, but it had certain advantages, too. The slumping of his broad shoulders indicated concession and Happy slapped him on the back.

“Great!”

“You know what to do?”

“Know the plan backward and forward, Boss.”

“All right, but play it *safe,* huh?”

“Sure, Boss.”

“Good evening. Welcome to Stark International.” The beautiful young woman was one of many, all in the crimson-and-gold costumes selected for the occasion.

“San Benedicto?” the mustachioed man in the trim, white uniform said, eyeing the woman’s cleavage.

The woman consulted a list. “Ah, yes, General Aguilar. Corinne, will you escort the general to his table?”

A smiling blonde approached and took the general’s arm. “Well, howdy there, general. Why don’cha just let me take you right over here to yore table? My, you shore have mucho medals!” She laughed gaily and the Latin smiled brightly. That Tony Stark, he thought, he really was a playboy! Who else would have what looked like the summer months of the last six years’ *Playmates* as escorts?

“Good evening. Welcome to Stark International.”

A man with somber skin and dark eyes looked around suspiciously. “This does not look like an auction.”

The beautiful woman with the list said, “I can assure you, sir, this *is* the place. Here is a schedule of events. You’ll see that we have some preliminary auctions, prior to the main event, shall we say. The Stark Oil-slick Sucker . . . or SOS as we call it . . . that quite efficiently removes the spilled oil. Something we must think about in these days of self-destructing freighters, mustn’t we? May I see your invitation?”

“I have this cable,” the man said, pulling the paper impatiently from his pocket. He looked around as the welcoming-committee woman checked her list. A tent had been set up between the Research and Development section and the main factory, effectively masking the ruin of

the wing of the Administration Building. Four-person tables were set up facing a dais and screen. Waiters and waitresses moved among the guests taking drink orders. The Arabs ordered grape juice and, depending upon the *way* they ordered, they got grape juice or something that looked the same but was somewhat stronger. After all, Muhammad's edict against booze was made a long time before men had to do business in foreign lands, bartering petrodollars for unusual armament.

"Yes, sir, Turkey," the woman said, checking him off. "Ellen, would you take Mister, excuse me, the caliph, to his table."

"I do not understand why I could not be allowed my usual entourage?" the Turk said moodily.

"Oh, sir, you can understand how *big* a thing this can get, even with just the principles involved, can't you? Ellen?"

The Turk eyed a tableful of Greeks. Oil transporters, olive oil merchants. He sniffed and sat down. He forgot his momentary anger when the bosomy waitress bent over his table.

They were there from all over, jet-planing in from everywhere. The French, talkative and charming. The haughty Germans, looking for a bargain. The British, because they thought they should be. The Canadians, mostly out of curiosity. South Americans, suspicious and arrogant. Elegant Africans, sturdy Bulgarians, slight Orientals, even a dark-skinned Indian with a maharaja's treasure behind him—an impotent royalty hoping to change things back. Americans, hard, practical men, looking for an edge. Lanky Australians with nuclear-fuel money. A South African backed by gold, an Italian with an export business, a Slav with a dream.

Not one of them was the head of a country, but every one of them represented one, or a huge corporation. Some were brothers of presidents-for-life, others were cousins, old

friends, defense ministers, secretaries, generals, first sons, and potential revolutionaries with ideas.

But every one knew the potential behind being *the* one with Iron Man's potential—or even one of a select few.

The ground rules were simple: the most money got the franchise, a simple suit, plans for Mode II—the weaponless Iron Man suit—and supervision of the factory construction and pilot manufacturing.

The bidding was to start at one hundred million dollars.

But first there were other, smaller auctions. The men in the tent were really not interested in ecological gimmicks. They brightened a bit at the auction of a flyer, for they could see the military potential.

Then Tony Stark took over. He had been sitting quietly by, letting the professional auctioneer work—but now was the big moment. He stepped up on the dais and simultaneously, from behind the screen, out stepped Iron Man.

"What you see here," Tony Stark said, "is Mode II, the stripped down basic suit." The suit looked very much like the standard Iron Man armor, gold and crimson, but certain small details of weaponry were lacking, as Stark quickly pointed out.

"This is the suit upon which you will bid. But I can anticipate, your next question. How do you *know* this is a reasonable facsimile of the famous Iron Man suit? There is only one way to convince you." He turned to the crimson-and-gold suit and bowed slightly.

Iron Man shot straight up, through the tent, into the sky. Through the rent fabric they could see the armored figure do aerial acrobatics, as Stark continued his pitch.

"This suit can be used for policing areas and, in industry, for lifting heavy objects. In the nuclear area, with certain

modifications, which are available, it can be used to dispose of nuclear wastes."

The armored figure plunged headfirst toward the ground, bringing a gasp from the welcoming committee, but it leveled off, reared back and settled down gently, coming down through the torn tent, to land softly upon the dais.

"Now a test of strength," Tony said. Four men brought in a steel I beam eight feet long and set it down with a clang before the armored man. The figure within the suit picked up the ten-inch beam easily and bent it into a pretzel shape.

There was a flicker of interest in Tony's eyes when he saw a man enter the back of the tent. He was dressed in a full Arabian costume, flowing robes and headdress, and that modern addition, dark glasses. He sat alone at the back. While Iron Man was *unbending* the I beam to tortured shrieks of metal, Stark asked the beautiful welcoming-committee woman who the late entry was.

She checked and said, "Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Muhammad, of Profit Oil Company." Stark surreptitiously eyed the sheikh, checking him out. Everything seemed all right.

It was time to start the bidding. He sensed it. The "vibes" told him. *Vibes.* He had to smile at himself. He thought of himself as an engineer—a practical, inventive, down-to-earth person—not a metaphysician.

Yet.

Yet there were times when he *felt* things, things he could not explain. The way you instantly like, or dislike someone, or some place, and for no reason you can discern. You just feel it.

As a scientist Stark knew there was little evidence to support a hypothesis of any extrasensory perception.

Yet.

Yet the brain is a marvelous tool. It collects information below the level of sensory awareness. Everything it collects is noted, recorded, remembered: the wind flapping the remnants of tent roof, the smoke from cigarettes, the color and shape of the women's clothing, the dais creaking under Iron Man's weight, the distant thump-thump-beep-thump from a machine in the factory area, a jet liner's chalk mark across the sky, perfume, sweat, everything. Things you never noticed about a person, until you concentrated on them. Twitches, shiftings, rumblings, habits, eye motion, gum chewing, skin texture, hair condition, an unbuttoned shirt, a tendency to slump, to talk with the hands, to repeat gestures, everything.

It was all put down by the brain. Sometimes the brain got to the conclusion before you did and tried to tell the mind, "Hey, take notice of this!"

Stark stepped to the center of the dais and raised his hand. Iron Man grew motionless.

"The bidding will start at one hundred million dollars, American, payable at least fifty percent in gold, the rest in Swiss francs or German marks. The bidding increments, to simplify things, will be in one-million-dollar units. You may ask any questions you think necessary to clarify any points that are unclear. Who will bid one hundred million to start?"

The Russian raised his hand. An Oriental raised him two million. Others began to bid.

One hundred fifty-four million.

One hundred seventy-six million.

Two hundred million.

Two five.

Two fifteen.

The bidding slowed as the bidders thought out their assignments.

Two twenty.

Two hundred thirty-six million dollars.

Two fifty.

Bidders dropped out, disappointed, and a little fearful, eyeing the narrowing ring of final bidders.

An American bid two fifty-three.

An Australian bid two fifty-four.

Two fifty-six from the Frenchman.

Two *sixty,* from the German.

Two seventy, from a suave Arab—but not the Arab at the rear of the tent.

“Two seventy-one,” murmured a smiling African whose country had recently discovered a vast gold deposit.

“Two seventy-two,” stated the South American general gruffly.

“Three hundred million,” said the suave Arab, not looking around. It stopped everyone. People looked at each other.

“A bid of three hundred million dollars has been made,” Tony Stark said, looking over the audience. “Three hundred, once . . . twice . . .”

“Three hundred twenty million dollars,” said the Arab in the rear. Everyone turned back to look.

“Three twenty from the gentleman from Profit Oil,” Stark said. There was, within him, a growing cold center. This was the moment.

“Three twenty once.”

“Three twenty twice.” A Greek shipping magnate shrugged and sipped his wine. The suave Arab remained aloof. The general stopped thinking about ruling the world and started thinking about other things. What had been that lovely blonde’s name? Corinne? He wondered if he should go home or take a vacation in Switzerland. The two hundred million in his country’s gold he had brought with him, sitting in customs, would go a long, long way in Europe. Just a

vacation, he thought. Thirty or forty years, perhaps. Running a country got to be a drag after the first twenty years.

“Three twenty, sold, to the man from Profit Oil.” There was polite applause and the waiters hurried out. Tony Stark stepped down from the dais and walked quickly to Sheikh Muhammad’s table.

“Congratulations, sir. If you’ll follow me to the Administration Building so we might sign the contracts.”

“Of course.” He was a big man for an Arab, dark skinned, with a thick beard trimmed close.

Sheikh Muhammad was very cordial, though inexpressive, and signed all the necessary papers. He exchanged gold receipts with Stark: one receipt for two hundred million, four for twenty-five million, another four for five million dollars. There were still more receipts in the thick wallet. The exchange was witnessed and countersigned by a notary. The gold was Stark’s. The suit was the Sheikh’s.

“We have numerous oil-field fires in my country,” the Arab said in a sudden burst of conversation. “Your amazing suit will, I trust, be able to fight such a menace.”

“I’m certain of it,” Stark said. The Arab had his jet plane at Stark Field, adjacent to Stark International. The Arab accompanied Stark to a warehouse to supervise the crating of the Iron Man suit. They were followed by several curious ex-bidders.

“Where is Iron Man?” the Bulgarian asked.

“I’m afraid my friend is a bit shy. He decanted himself from the suit in private and you will find it in here,” Stark said, opening the door.

The crimson-and-gold suit lay in pieces and they watched as expert packers crated the suit and sealed it. Stark handed over the complete plans, reduced to microfilm for easier transportation, and shook hands with the Sheikh.

“You must excuse me now,” Stark said to the Arab. “I must see to my other guests.”

“Of course,” the Arab said, bowing slightly and touching his fingers to heart, mouth, and forehead.

Stark strode away into the warehouse and the Arab watched workers loading the box onto an electric cart.

Stark passed quickly through the tent of chatting VIPs. “Ladies, see that these gentlemen get all they want to eat or drink,” he told the chief hostess.

“That’s *all* they’ll get, Boss,” she whispered.

“I know, that’s why I hired you.”

“Where you off to?” she asked. “Stick around and make it a real party.”

Stark smiled. “Sorry. Business before pleasure.”

“How much before?” she asked, but he was gone. Well, you can’t blame a girl for trying. He *was* very good looking—and very rich.

Some time after Stark slipped away those in the tent heard the roar of a jet taking off. Those that had bid on the armor and lost put out their glasses for more wine. Stark *did* have superb taste in champagne. Well, with three hundred and twenty million dollars in gold, he could afford to indulge them.

The Arab sheikh was sitting in the spacious customized lounge of the executive jet when the pilot came out of the cockpit, wearing a trim blue uniform with gold insignia.

“Hey,” the Arab said in a growling voice, “ya ain’t my pilot!”

The pilot made certain with his thumb that his nose plugs were securely in place, even as he drew his gas gun and fired it. “That’s right, fella,” the pilot said.

The Arab came up out of the chair right into the cloud of colorless gas. His eyes bulged and he gasped. He fell heavily, reaching for the man in the uniform. When he struck the deck he was out. His headdress fell off. A disguised Happy Hogan lay unconscious at the feet of the hijacker.

Twelve

His head hurt, as if an elephant had gone disco dancing on his cranium. Happy groaned and pried open one eye with a great force of will. His other eye popped at once. His headdress and false beard were gone.

He was, in fact, lying on the cold, concrete floor of some huge, dark room in his rumpled clothes, feeling stiff and sore. Happy looked around cautiously, not moving anything but his eyes, the immediate survival instinct going into operation.

He saw the dimly lit control panels around the lower part of the room, and shadowy figures hunched over hooded screens like the gnomes of some evil Santa Claus. A movement caught his eye and he looked up to see, atop a pillar, a semicircle of screens and assorted, six lighted control buttons—and within that arc something huge and monstrous, something not quite human. It sent an involuntary quiver through the ex-boxer’s muscles, a tightening, a ready-to-run signal.

The dimly lit figure atop the pillar turned slightly, shocking Happy. He was not certain what he was seeing, because of the darkness, but it was grotesquely deformed, almost a parody of humanity.

“Welcome to the land of the living,” a deep voice said from the pillar top. Happy Hogan could see movement in the shadows, the suggestion of a monstrous mouth, the glint of bulging eyes. It was all wrong, too big, too deformed. Primitive fear made his body tense, and he fought back the feeling. He’d had that feeling before, going up against Man Mountain McQuire, that statue with hair, and against Smasher Pelz, the bearded knockout king.

To cover his fear, Happy grunted and got to his feet. He was still dizzy and his stomach didn’t feel good, but he glared defiantly back at the *thing* atop the pillar. This didn’t seem to faze the creature, who chuckled shortly. “Play your cards right, Hogan, and you might . . . just *might* . . . remain among the living.”

Covering his nervousness Happy adopted the psych-’em-out tactics he sometimes employed in the ring. He glared at the man-thing and growled out a question. “Who *are* ya, mister?”

The chuckle came again and a light flicked on, bathing Modok in light for the first time. Happy Hogan uttered an involuntary gasp. “God in heaven!” he said, taking a step backward. It was Modok! There was no mistaking that misshapen head, that oversized cranium, that wide mouth. Happy’s usually iron gut churned in disgust. If Modok had been totally alien, a creature from another world, Happy knew he would not have been so affected. It was the distortions of the human form that most affected us, he thought. The Neanderthal-like form of Man Mountain McQuire had stirred his own fear of anything that was different, but nothing like this!

However, years of prizefighting had taught him the value of not giving anything away, of not showing any weakness to the opponent, and Hogan fought back. The bulging eyes watched him like a bug on a pin, the appallingly wide mouth twisted in contempt, the protruding forehead gleamed under the light, but Happy Hogan swallowed his disgust and snapped out an insult. “We thought ya wuz dead, Modok . . . and I can see ya are. I thought the garbage collectors would have bagged ya up by now, ya freak.”

It wasn’t much of an insult, but it was the tone that mattered most. Happy saw the immense features contort in anger and gave a quick look around the room. With the added light from above Modok, Hogan saw the standard AIM uniforms on the flunkies hunched over the myriad controls, the muscular guards here and there, their arms and positions. He decided to strike, to counterpunch before the head of AIM could recover.

“So this is AIM, huh? What’s the matter, didn’t ya pay your Con Ed bill?” He gestured around at the shadows. “No, I get it, sure.” He sneered up at the blazing eyes. “I’d do it, too, if I looked like a rotten cantaloupe.” His laugh was shaky, but insultingly defiant. He might go down, but no one ever accused Happy Hogan of taking a dive.

But his tirade also gave Modok time to recover from his anger. He hated himself when he smashed insects with the power of his mind; it was too easy, usually. Better they should suffer, and suffer for a long, long time. Without even seeing them, Modok enjoyed the thought of the suffering certain malcontents and defectors were enduring in the lower depths of the AIM headquarters. He had perfected such delicately effective tortures. A man—or woman—could go on and on, never quite dying, never even quite escaping into unconsciousness, but staying at the threshold level for hours, days, weeks, in intense pain, the life-force fluttering

like some impaled butterfly, the mind and body screaming for release.

Yes, and this one, too, would pay for his insults, Modok smiled. He would be the perfect first subject for Modok's newest invention, something conceived in idle thought, but giving the AIM leader immense pleasure. It was a simple operation, really. A small hole drilled in the skull. A plug of bone and flesh removed and a probe inserted. Right to the pleasure center. Intense pleasure. *Intense* pleasure, pleasure going through and beyond until every sensory impulse was the sheerest and most exquisite pain. The rustle of clothing against the skin was like a massive file scraping away flesh. Footsteps were smashing blows to the ears. Lights were spikes driven into the eyes. The victim's own screams would feel as though the head were being ripped open by a dinosaur's teeth. The rumbling of an empty stomach was the savagery of a score of ravenous rats.

Yes, indeed, the perfect end of this foolish pug, with his futile posturing against the might and power of Modok. And then, after him—Iron Man. That would be a delicious experience indeed, seeing Iron Man on the rack, plugged into his Ultimate Pleasure Unit.

Abruptly, Modok's thoughts were brought back to Happy Hogan. He gazed down at the defiant fool, and realized the ex-fighter had been speaking for some time.

"—ya that Iron Man will rip this place apart, sink ya and yer whole crummy outfit, deep-six the lot of ya, wait and see!" Happy stood with fists on hips, glaring up at Modok, but his expression changed when the hideous head began laughing.

It was a pleasant laugh, really, one of sincere amusement. "You pitiful worm!" One of Modok's relatively spindly arms rose and he made a gesture. "Bring in the crate!"

A door slid back almost at once and four strong men brought in a wooden crate. Happy recognized it at once and his throat tightened. It was the crate containing the Iron Man armor. A beam of light went on, aiming down from the high ceiling, bathing Happy and the crate in a bright glow. Happy blinked, his eyes darting from the crate back up to Modok. Then, in from the still-open door came a platoon of uniformed AIM thugs, each with an AIM machine gun in his hands.

“Why are ya guarding a crate of empty armor?” Happy asked, the nervousness ill-concealed in his voice. He attempted a laugh, as if this were proof of AIM’s stupidity.

Modok chuckled again, his voice rising in genuine amusement. “Such fools you are! You and your Tony Stark thought you were so smart, using this transparent trick as a ploy to find our secret headquarters.” His voice grew louder and angrier. “But Modok is infinitely smarter!” His hand waver before his bulging eyes. *“I* knew the reason for Stark’s sudden decision to auction his own armor. I, Modok, knew at once how he hoped to trick me. Me, Modok, he tried to trick!” Modok laughed, but there was a knife in his voice, a snarl in his sudden abrupt gesture.

“Fire!”

The platoon of machine gunners was ranged in an arc around the crate and at once they leveled their weapons and began firing. The lead slugs careened off the concrete floor with whining screams and sent Happy jumping toward the wall for cover. The wooden crate disintegrated under hundreds of slugs, with splinters of wood flying in every direction. The noise was deafening and Happy put his hands over his ears. Even some of the AIM technicians at their consoles lunged to their feet and scampered away to safety.

Then, without warning, the crate exploded and a gold-and-red figure rose from the riddled crate. *Iron Man!*

He stood under the hail of bullets as the machine gunners emptied the last of their clips against his armor. The slugs ricocheted off and the empty cartridges tinkled to the floor in a metallic rain. Then, one by one, the guns fell silent—and the silence was deafening.

Happy looked up from his protected cover behind an AIM minicomputer. An ugly gash in the metal near his head showed how close he had come to having his head shot off. But his concern was for Iron Man, who had secretly replaced the empty armor in the crate with himself and had patiently ridden out his hunch, lying motionless in the wooden coffin.

However, Iron Man was unscathed and was already launching himself by his boot-jets right up at Modok. There was a rush of air as lights shot down between Modok and the charging Iron Man. Happy blinked as he realized they were not lights, but reflections—reflections from an immense slab of clear, tough acrylic, easily a foot thick, dropping down between Modok, in his semicircular cubicle, and the rest of the control room. The plastic panel struck the floor with a thud, and hidden metal locks latched, sealing off the AIM master from the attack. In that same moment, Iron Man, unable to maneuver in time, struck the panel with bone-shattering force, and rebounded across the control chamber. He struck the far wall and slid to the ground with a clatter.

Iron Man recovered quickly and brought up his hands to send a twin repulsor-beam blast against the clear plastic. But before he could do so, the machine-gun squad was on him. Their automatic weapons having proved ineffective against his armor, they were attempting to immobilize him by sheer numbers, long enough for their bomb expert to slap a double fistful of plastic explosive against an armor joint and blow off an arm or leg.

The AIM sergeant in command bellowed hoarsely for the explosives expert as Iron Man was buried beneath a horde

of yellow-clad agents. Happy heard the slap-slap of running feet coming from behind him and whirled to stop the gallop. Happy's scarred fist swung and connected, lifting the surprised explosives expert off his feet. Happy jumped on him with both feet, a crude but effective action, and ripped the explosive from his hand. Hogan tore apart the fusing mechanism and threw the slab of plastic explosive in one direction and the fuse in another.

Happy looked around at Iron Man in time to see the yellow uniforms explode in various trajectories away from the Golden Avenger. Their screams echoed in the room and the AIM technicians around the room began fleeing by every exit, deserting their screens and controls. They were not combat troops and were clearing the area for those who were.

Another door slid open and another squad of AIM troopers charged in. The one in front carried the ugly, black, metal shape of a nerve tangler and he aimed it right at Iron Man. But the armored Avenger was too quick. In a swift, flowing motion he seized an attacking agent by the shirtfront and hurled him straight at the person leveling the nerve tangler. The man fired, but his beam struck the screaming human cannonball a second before the cannonball struck him. But that time Iron Man was plowing through the newly arrived squad, heading toward the plastic shield around Modok.

Perched in his power chair on the pillar, Modok watched the fight calmly. He flicked a switch and a screen blipped into life. He could see the assembled foreign buyers sitting entranced before another screen, watching the fight. "You see, gentlemen, this armor has advantages. You have seen how impregnable it is, even against the jacketed slugs of our own superior machine guns. The bullets were, of course, armor piercing. That is, they would pierce any ordinary shielding that a human body might carry, such as the

newest fiberglass and armorall shields developed by the United States Army and certain police agencies.”

Modok’s voice was calm. He was selling. Iron Man’s advance was stopped by the necessity of immobilizing another AIM trooper who had scooped up the nerve tangler and was attempting to get a clear shot at the Avenger. His aim was deflected by his own bustling, angry agents, and he sent three of AIM’s best assault troops crashing to the floor, unconscious.

Iron Man seized the nerve tangler itself, crushing it in his armored glove, shattering the delicate electronic circuitry. A side slap sent the soldier flying across the floor to he in a motionless heap. Then Iron Man once again charged toward the plastic shield, this time to the point where it was latched to the floor. His obvious intent was to use his repulsor rays to wreck the latches and give him access, under the thick plastic, to Modok.

“As you can see, gentlemen,” Modok said, “there is no motor impairment. He moves as easily in the armor as you do—probably better. Any soldier could be taught its use quickly. The effectiveness would be superb, don’t you think?”

The one called Salvadore nodded. “But what about other types of weapons, eh? Flamethrowers, grenades, gas . . .”

Modok spoke into a microphone and almost at once another door slid open. A three-man squad ran in. Two carried machine guns as protection for the third, who had a flamethrower. The muzzle of the awkward weapon dripped tongues of fire as the soldier swung the terrible weapon toward Iron Man.

With utter disregard for the lives or safety of the other AIM troops, the operator triggered the terrible weapon and a blast of liquid flame shot across the room. The screams of half the troops deafened Happy as he dived for cover. Human torches staggered away to fall writhing to the

ground as the flamethrower sprayed hell over the tight group of struggling men.

Within the armor, Tony Stark felt the heat and once again thanked his foresight. His heat sensors had triggered the protective eye shields, which clicked into place and sealed, activating his interior cooling system. It was hot as he waded through a wall of flame, but he survived.

Although the flames blinded him, he knew where the torcher was. But before he could reach him, the flamethrower operator dropped the weapon, shrugged out of the harness of the tank, and ran away. The two guards machine-gunned Iron Man to no effect; then one of them swung around to stitch a row of bloody holes across the back of the fleeing operator. Iron Man's fists sent them crashing to the floor next to the sputtering flamer.

"You see, my friends, this is indeed a unique weapon. Not even the direct blast of a Mark IV could stop him." Modok spoke with pride, as if it had been he and not Stark who had developed the armor. The blackened bodies of a dozen troopers did not bother him at all. He pressed a button and another squad of yellow-clad henchmen charged in.

Dodd, the Englishman, spoke in his clipped accent. "And the effect of high explosives?"

"Observe . . ."

The squad charged straight at Iron Man, although Happy Hogan rose up to smash one of the rear echelon in the mouth with a heavy fist. The squad bore fistfuls of AIM explosive grenades and two were thrown straight at the Golden Avenger. Happy saw the gray ovoids arcing through the air and dived for cover behind the battered computer.

Iron Man activated his boot-jets and shot into the air as the first of the grenades exploded. The compression within the confined space sent the AIM troops sprawling and several cried out in pain. The second exploded, but Iron Man

had risen high above the blast and his repulsors crashed down at the AIM agents, sending any that were left crumpling against the concrete floor.

Iron Man whirled in the air on the twin beams of energy shooting from his boots and brought his hands up to send a beam splashing against the plastic shield protecting Modok. But the acrylic was unexpectedly hard and the beam of force fanned out, dissipating in the heated air of the control room.

The foreign weapons buyers cowered in their room, well away from the combat zone, but Modok remained impassive. The thick acrylic showed tiny fracture lines where Iron Man's blast had struck.

Iron Man was positioning himself for a second blast, aiming right at the impact point of the first blast, when the gas began to hiss in from hidden nozzles, spurting in under pressure to flood the room with a nerve-paralyzing ingredient.

Happy!

Iron Man twisted again, knowing his sensor circuits would handle the gas, but Happy was unprotected.

Iron Man saw Happy, surrounded by a semicircle of unconscious AIM bodies, fall to the floor limply. The score or more of remaining AIM troops had toppled due to the effect of the gas. Seeing that there was nothing he could do for Happy—the gas was either deadly or not and it was too late in any case—Iron Man turned to send a twin repulsor blast against Modok's thick plastic protection.

The fracture lines increased, radiating out from the impact point. "The gas did not work," Solomon said, a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Exactly," Modok said. "As you have seen, nothing sent against this armor has been effective. The suit is nearly impregnable. You could use it in fires—oil fires, for example.

No troops could stand against it. A company of trained, loyal troops equipped like this—" He paused as Iron Man blasted the plastic shield again, splashing raw energy across the shiny face, creating still more, still deeper fractures, "—could conquer, control and monitor any area against *any* enemy."

Iron Man made a sudden move, dropping from his midair position to once again send blasts against the locking mechanisms at the base of the massive shield. Modok saw a thin tongue of fire edge under the acrylic slab. It was only a matter of time before Iron Man, now unopposed in the control room, blasted his way through. He knew the four buyers sensed that.

"Do you have other defenses?" the Oriental asked in his thin, reedy voice.

"Naturally," Modok said flatly. "The one thing that *will* stop armor such as this is . . . Modok!" A complicated metal-and-fabric harness kept Modok's trunk-sized head in place within his power chair, and from the center of a plate in the middle of his forehead came a searing blast of mental energy.

In an instant, the beam had sizzled through the air, passing through the plastic protection, through Iron Man's helmet, bypassing every sensor circuit since it was a totally different sort of energy, and brought Iron Man to a sudden halt.

It was as if his plug had been pulled. Iron Man, the Golden-Avenger, the superhero, had been made instantly immobile!

The silence was complete. The gassed victims, friend and foe alike, were motionless on the floor of the control room. Only Iron Man stood, in his flame-blackened armor, with two score yellow-clad warriors at his feet, and Happy Hogan sprawled nearby.

Solomon's sigh was voluptuous over the speaker. Dodd said, "My lord!" Salvadore made a gesture to ward off evil,

then grinned wickedly. The Oriental watched impassively, but there was a glimmer in his eye.

“You see, gentlemen, there is *one* force that can stop Iron Man—or anyone else in that armor.” There was a smugness in his voice, but all the buyers breathed a sigh of relief. With a rampaging monster like that on the loose, there was no telling who or what he might destroy next. Such people were not the kind that had regard for the delicate balances, for the political realities, for the necessities of certain arrangements. They had all heard of Iron Man, and of his freakish companions—creatures with no regard for political affairs, for the proper applications of power. No, they were all political infants, caring only for their own standards of right and wrong, never seeing another side.

Modok’s finger stabbed at another button. Hidden ventilators sucked away the nerve gas. Within moments, those that had been felled by the poisonous atmosphere were staggering to their feet. Others, victims of Iron Man’s steel fists or his deadly repulsors, lay still. Happy Hogan was one of the first to recover. He saw the motionless gold-and-scarlet figure and got shakily to his feet.

“What the blue blazes have ya done?” he shouted at Modok as he staggered toward Iron Man, stepping over bodies and roughly pushing aside weary troopers. Happy felt Iron Man’s armor, but it was as if the Avenger had been turned into a metal statue.

“Yes, gentlemen, one force and one force only—the power of my own unmatchable brain. Iron Man’s armor *is* truly invincible . . . against any ordinary forces or combinations of forces.”

Happy shot a glare up at Modok, no longer repulsed by his hideous appearance, only angered by his actions.

He tried to revive Iron Man, to quickly bring him back into action, if only to save his life. With the suit deactivated, there was no telling how long Tony Stark’s heart might stay

functional, not after such a neural blast as he had just suffered.

The plastic protection hissed back into its ceiling slot and Modok smiled thinly. “I promised you Iron Man’s armor,” he said to the men in the distant room, “and I *always* keep my word. Are you ready to accept delivery?”

“We . . . we have to discuss it for a minute,” Dodd said. Modok smiled and turned up the amplification. He listened to their whispered conversation with only half a mind. They were already thinking of betrayal—he read it into their every guarded word—but that did not bother him. He could protect himself from their maneuvers.

What Modok thought with the other half of his mind was far more important. AIM was on the way out, he thought. Its structure and function had become too exposed. Captain America—that patriotic fool—had done damage beyond repair. Iron Man had also contributed to the weakening of AIM’s forces and resources. A smart man would move on—and up.

AIM could continue and Modok could continue to hold the power. There were still resources, agents, operations, laboratories, secret plans, and experiments untouched or relatively undamaged by the crude violence of the Avenger. But a smart man would move on . . . and definitely up.

Modok had certain ideas about what constituted “up.” He smiled to himself as he overheard the buyers coming to the only conclusion they *could* come to.

“Mister Modok . . . ?” Dodd said. “We are ready to accept delivery.”

“At the agreed-upon price, of course,” Solomon said, and the Oriental nodded.

“Very well, gentlemen, but there is one change, dictated by your slowness and disbelief.”

“But we didn’t—” Salvadore began.

Modok ignored him. “That change is simple and I think you will agree it is to our mutual advantage.”

“And that change is—?” the Oriental murmured suspiciously.

“If you want the armor, you must take Modok as well.”

Surprise showed on the televised features of the buyers. They looked at each other, trying to read the reaction.

“You are planning to mass-manufacture the armor in your private factories in certain well-separated nations,” Modok said.

“How did you—” began Solomon, but Dodd hushed him.

“Obvious tactic, my dear sir. Then of course,” he said casually, “you intend to pull off *coups* in your own countries.”

There was a gasp from all four, even the Oriental. “You cannot know that!” Salvadore exclaimed.

Modok laughed at them, a sneering, insulting sound. “Gentlemen, gentlemen, you must *never* underestimate Modok. I have a rather complete dossier on each of you. *Complete,* I said. I know how your minds operate. I know your favorite foods, your sexual preferences and practices, your secret ambitions, your puny little deals and bribes. I have a list of your Swiss bank account numbers . . . including, I might add, Señor Salvadore, the key words as well. And Mister Dodd, do the words *Bellingham-Seven* and *Firth of Forth-Nine* mean anything to you? Of course they do, sir, do not be shy! They are the ultimate keys to your computer records in England and America, are they not?”

The buyers, their faces pale, exchanged another set of looks, this time with even more distressed expressions. “I could go on, of course,” Modok continued. “Mister Solomon’s little paramilitary organization, for example. The Black Dragon Society of Mister—”

“Enough,” the Oriental said quickly. “We acknowledge your Superior intelligence and information, but what . . .” he glanced at his companions, then back at the screen to Modok’s face, “. . . are your plans?”

“To be put in charge of the laboratories and manufacturing plants which shall produce this armor, then . . .” He paused for effect. “Then a high position in the first of your countries to fall under your new regime—and that, I surmise, will be Señor Salvadore’s Costa Verde.”

The buyers, now somewhat hardened by the repeated shocks at the revelations of their secret plans, were less surprised. If Modok knew what he seemed to know, it was no great surprise that he knew of the first of the four major takeovers, the cornerstones for their eventual political and military dominance.

“You . . . you are certain the power of your mind can always defeat Iron Man, or anyone else in a similar set of armor?” Dodd asked.

“Yes. I think I have proven that.” He gestured toward the immobile Iron Man and the frustrated activities of Happy Hogan, who had been attempting to revive his employer and friend.

The buyers exchanged meaningful looks. They all knew the ambitions of the ambitious for they, themselves, had ridden to power and wealth by the power of their dreams . . . and would continue to rise. They knew what some people might do, once they had obtained the vast power contained in any version of the Iron Man armor. An overriding force would be highly useful—and, after all, Modok was only one person. Any one individual, however powerful, could be controlled by a great variety of means. Cleopatra had controlled first Caesar, then Mark Antony, two of the most powerful men on earth at the time, by the power of her beauty and imagination, the wealth of her nation, and a complete absence of scruples. Queen Theodora had risen

from the lowest prostitute to queen of Byzantium by the power she learned to use. Men of great wealth had learned to use their power, overt and covert, to shape the destinies of nations. Men used force, bribes, subtle actions, and the broadest spectrum of violence to gain their ends. They would find the chink in Modok's defenses and learn to control him. He was, after all, a freak. Freaks were certain to have greater and more obvious flaws than others. If he wanted sex, for example, no woman in Costa Verde or any of the countries they would come to control would be able to escape her duty. If it was drugs he desired, they would establish laboratories to manufacture them. No matter how kinky, how strange, how outrageous his needs and desires, they knew they would have the ability to satisfy them.

They were all adept at manipulating people, including people of prestige and power. Modok would be no different in principle, just perhaps different in application. They smiled at each other—soft, knowing smiles. People were such dupes. As Napoleon had said, "Men are led by such trifles." An actress feared mutilation—a senator wanted the actress . . . the senator introduced legislation . . . Other senators wanted homes, money, unusual sex, or continued political life, so they supported the legislation . . . and the figures of power prospered.

"Yes, of course," Salvadore said smoothly. "We would be honored. It is, as you said, a move of mutual benefit."

And Modok smiled. He, too, was adept at the manipulation of pawns.

Thirteen

“Jasper, I’m so worried!” Pepper exclaimed. “The plane dropped right off the radar less than two hundred miles out.”

Jasper Sitwell patted her shoulder, his stern face filled with sorrow. “Don’t worry, don’t worry, Pepper. After all, Happy is in good hands with Iron Man in the crate. That is a powerful combination, you know. We *knew* they’d try something along the way. We have only to wait for a signal. SHIELD is ready with a strike force from the helicarrier.”

Pepper sighed. “I hope . . . I . . . Jasper, will they be on time? Will they get a signal out? Maybe we should have put a radar tracer on the armor.”

“You know Mister Stark nixed that. He said they’d be certain to smell a rat and put a tracer on any radio waves going out. They’d just find the transmitter, kill it, and know the whole thing was a setup.”

Pepper sighed. “Yes, you’re right. But so many things can go wrong . . .”

“Now, now,” Jasper said. “Where did Mister Stark get to, anyway?”

Pepper veiled her eyes. “He’s . . . he’s in one of his secret labs, I think. You know how he is when he gets an idea.”

“Uh-huh,” Jasper said, nodding. The dangers were great. There was something very wrong somewhere. Who was behind all this, anyway? he wondered. Someone powerful, very powerful. This was no time for Stark to be tinkering away in some smelly lab. He ought to be helping.

Modok had come to the part that was, for him, dessert. He blanked off the cameras to the buyers and turned his attention toward the immobile Iron Man.

“Hogan, stand back,” he rumbled.

“I’ll not,” Hogan snapped, still trying to unfreeze the armor. “He’s my friend and I’ll not—”

Modok made a gesture and four of AIM’s troopers seized Happy. “Put him in Cell Block Beta,” Modok commanded and the soldiers led off the struggling Hogan. Looking back over his shoulder at Iron Man he let out a yell of defiance as he saw Modok deliberately blast Iron Man with another blazing mental bolt.

“Ya—!” Hogan knocked one of his guards down and was about to belt another when a rifle butt crashed against his skull. There was a bright light in his mind, then Happy Hogan took the count. The three remaining guards dragged him away unceremoniously.

Modok watched with interest as Iron Man regained his senses. Ready with a paralyzing bolt, Modok watched as Iron Man swayed slightly, then looked around.

“Welcome back, tin man. Please do not trouble both of us with further physical activities. I believe I have proven that your metal exoskeleton is no match for my mental powers.” Modok permitted himself a slight, sneering smile.

Iron Man was silent, but his head turned this way and that, seeking information. The revived AIM troopers were hauling away the bodies. Happy Hogan was gone. The plastic shield was up. There was still power in his repulsor rays. One quick motion and he could send a blast straight at Modok's deformed figure. He tensed, sending the motor impulses to the powered arms of the suit, and discovered he could not move.

Above him, Modok sneered again. "I have given only limited control back to you, my metallic dunce. Now if you would be so good as to remove your helmet I should like to see just what individual inhabits that iron suit."

Iron Man struggled to resist. He *wanted* to resist, to reach out and blast the monstrosity above him into atoms, but he could not. He felt his arms moving up, his hands reaching for the edges of his helmet . . .

. . . fingers moving . . .

. . . coming closer . . .

. . . unable to stop . . . it was a nightmare, going against everything Iron Man had fought for. In seconds, he would be revealed as who and what he was. Everything would be lost. Iron Man would never again have the anonymity to retreat to, to disappear into.

. . . he felt his fingers, unguided by his mind, unlatch the helmet . . .

. . . depolarizing it into a clothlike substance . . .

. . . and pulling it off.

"Tony Stark!" Modok's voice betrayed his surprise. Then he laughed. *"Tony Stark?* The playboy fool? The womanizer? The financier?" Demonic laughter filled the empty chamber. "Tony *Stark?"*

"Among others," Stark said. His mind was racing. He could think of only one ploy, only one defense—safety in numbers.

“What do you mean?” Modok demanded, the laughter gone.

“I’m afraid you have defeated only Tony Stark, not Iron Man, old boy. You see, my bloated friend, Iron Man is not *a* man, but a, shall we say, a *group?”*

Modok’s eyes slitted to vicious slits. He felt the nerve pulse of frustration building in him, ready to trigger another angry mind blast, his best and ultimate weapon. He would reduce this meddling ass to a vegetable, burn out his neural circuits. Tony Stark would never even be able to feed himself again. Uncaring nurses would have to feed and wipe him all the long years of his life to come—a living corpse, he’d make him a living corpse . . .

“We long ago knew that sooner or later one of us would be caught and uncovered.” Tony Stark gave Modok a mocking smile. “You’ve already uncovered Happy. There are others, have *been* others. Your old friend, Captain America, for example. You will forgive me if I do not name all of my compatriots in this venture, I’m sure.”

There was a low rumble in the room and Stark identified it as a growl from the direction of Modok’s pedestal.

“I’m sorry to say certain of us have died wearing this armor, but their deaths in the line of duty were honorable deaths in the service of mankind.” Stark shrugged as well as he could with his limited control over the highly flexible armor.

“Since we knew full well that you would make an attempt to steal the armor from Happy, I decided to wear it myself, as well. Just to meet you face to face, Your Ugliness.” Stark made a brave smile and would have followed it through with a mocking bow, if he had been able.

There was a long, thoughtful pause as Modok regained his composure. His mounting anger controlled, he spoke softly. “So much the better, Tony Stark.” There was something in

his voice that made Stark's blood run cold, some hidden thought, some secret menace. "Now you will join us on our little trip to the secret laboratories of my new cohorts. Once there, you will help me mass-manufacture your famous armor."

"Like hell I will," Stark replied at once.

"Oh, you will," Modok said silkily. "If you do not, certain rather nasty things will happen. First to your friend, Hogan. We have certain, um, devices shall we say, that will make his continued hold on life rather less than, um, desirable." Modok paused to study Stark's impassive face. "Then, if that does not stir your feelings about helping us, I shall see that Pepper Hogan is brought here, and others you call friends, and you, Mr. Stark, shall watch them suffer as no human was meant to suffer. My torturers are very good, you know. They can make the pain go on and on."

Modok waited patiently. There were times when he liked the smooth, seamless, and deft application of power. Give me a fulcrum of power, he thought, and I can change the world.

"All right," Stark said, and Modok smiled thinly.

"I know you think to outwit me, Stark. I would in your place." Modok laughed mockingly. "Except, of course, that I would never be *in* your place."

He remained expressionless but Tony Stark was smiling inside. Exactly what I wanted. Perhaps not exactly the way I had hoped, but still, getting to the secret labs *is* the key.

"Guards!" Modok commanded. A door hissed open and ten of AIM's toughest troopers marched in. Modok frowned at Iron Man for a moment and Tony found he could move. "Take him to the jet."

Stark went off with them, finding that he still had only limited control. He could walk, that was all. "Strip him of

that armor," Modok called after them. "Then get those new business partners of mine on the plane, too."

The door hissed closed and Modok smiled. Sometimes it was almost too easy. Men *were* led by trifles: fear, usually—and scruples, love, ego. Modok continued to smile.

Fourteen

Happy’s head hurt—again.

Feels like Smasher Pelz caught me while I wasn’t lookin’, he thought wearily. Where was the referee, huh?

Happy Hogan felt the tender bump on the back of his head and thought maybe being knocked out by gas—twice!—was better than whatever steam shovel they had clobbered him with. Massaging the sore spot, he looked around.

Concrete—and bars.

Bare concrete walls, a metal bunk with a thin, stained mattress, a toilet with no seat, and a barred door looking out on more concrete. Happy got up from the bunk, felt the stab of pain tear off the back of his skull, and caught himself on the bars. He held on grimly, eyes closed, fighting the nausea and wondering why his brains weren’t dribbling down the back of his rumpled shirt.

After a thousand years or so he opened his eyes and tried to see down the corridor by pressing his face through the bars. Not much in sight. More bars along his side, nothing on

the other except the faint pattern of wood in the poured concrete. Not very artistic, he thought. Maybe they should decorate the place. The History and Glory of Advanced Idea Mechanics or sumpin'—bright colors, noble figures, lots of gears and sheaves of corn. Real post-awful mural. Brighten up the joint.

Happy sat back down and held his head and tried to figure out what to do. No bail here, no visits from a court-appointed lawyer, no civil rights—no nuthin', just pain and frustration.

What'n the blue blazes had they done with Iron Man? Killed him? Froze him up in that suit like he was a codfish?

Happy gritted his teeth and tried to make plans. How do you break out of a jail, anyway? Maybe they'd let Pepper in with a cake seasoned with a file. "If this wuz an Errol Flynn movie," he grumbled aloud, "there'd be some monks to switch costumes with—or a dumb guard." There were always dumb guards in every movie he'd ever seen with a guy in a jam like this—always dumb guards. Without no dumb guards how the heck is the movie going to keep moving on?

But this was no movie, he groaned to himself. This is what they call Real Life.

Concrete—and bars.

He *tried* to make plans, but nothing was coming.

Concrete.

And bars—lots of steel bars.

No dumb guards in sight.

Not even a semismart one.

Stripped of his armor, Tony Stark was given a fresh AIM uniform, but this one had a slight difference. It had a target painted on it.

“You fellas need visual aids?” Tony said as he held out the shirt.

“Shuddup and get in it,” the guard said, prodding him with a machine-gun barrel.

Stark dressed, tucked in his shirt, and meekly followed his special, private guard out to an enclosed garage. There, under the muzzles of several machine guns, and without the protection of his armor, he allowed himself to be blindfolded, handcuffed, and put into a car.

He heard a door creak open and the car started forward, went up a ramp, crossed some enclosed space, and climbed a spiral ramp. Stark tried to count the turns and estimate the distance, but it was useless. They stopped for another door to open mechanically then the sound changed. They were outdoors and going down a street. Again, Stark tried to memorize the pattern of left and right turns, but the driver was apparently covering a deliberately confusing path.

Then the car stopped. They pulled him out and he heard the sound of a jet whining into action. He was taken across an open space, then guided up a stairway and into the plane. He was fastened into a seat; the blindfold was left on.

Cautious people, Stark thought. I hope they are not so cautious with Happy. We have to get the location of the AIM headquarters to SHIELD.

The jet taxied into position. Stark heard carefully guarded conversation in at least two languages. The plane took off with a roar and they were airborne. Destination: unknown.

Happy felt better, but not much better. He could at least move his head from side to side without the feel of a bayonet jabbing into his skull. He considered his assets carefully.

Shirt, pants, shorts, socks; no belt or tie. No pocket change, wallet, or car keys. No credit cards, no set of master

lockpicks, no blasting powder. No secret compartment in the heels of his shoes. Even if there had been, he didn't have any shoes. So much for the fancy superspy breakouts. Something a bit cruder would have to be found.

Once again he looked the cell over carefully. The metal bunk was heavy steel, carefully welded. He doubted he could break anything off to use as a weapon. There was a lot of graffiti. *Modok is out of his gourd! For a good time, call the torture chamber. E=MC^2 Modok is such a creepy guy the roof over his head is a rock. Modok is all right in his place, but they haven't dug it yet.*

Gallows humor, by those with nothing to lose. Then Happy saw something. The graffiti had been scratched into the concrete all over the wall, probably with spoons. All along the base was a little trickle of concrete dust from the scratchings—and he had a pair of socks. Happy got down on his hands and knees and began to pick up little pinches of concrete dust, one painful, gritty bit at a time.

The jet droned on through the sky. Tony Stark sat quietly, trying to single out and overhear the murmurs of conversation. Where was Modok? Was he aboard? Who was flying with him? They sounded more intelligent, more cultured than the thugs who guarded him and talked incessantly about baseball.

Anthony Stark waited with barely concealed impatience for the plane to land. The next move would be Modok's . . . but Iron Man was still not checkmated, only in check.

Happy Hogan hefted the damp sock in his hand. The water from the toilet made the sockful of cement dust considerably heavier. He carefully concealed the sock in the folds of the bed, then lay down. He sat up almost at once and pulled off the other sock. He didn't want anyone to notice one missing and wonder where it was. His feet were

cold. He curled up in a suitable position to strike from and tried to look unconscious.

Pepper paced the floor, chewing on her lip, which was raw from all the chewing. Jasper had given up trying to make her sit down and was reading a SHIELD manual on poisonous plants. You never knew when something might come in handy.

The landing had been smooth enough. This time they pulled off his blindfold even before they unfastened him from the seat. Stark's legs were nearly asleep and he staggered upon standing. It gave him a chance to look out of the windows at what was outside.

Night—floodlights and a glint of metal vehicles. A hint of lush greenery—somewhere in the tropics. Could it be Costa Verde? he wondered.

"This way," the sergeant in charge snapped. Stark went down the steps and across the floodlit asphalt to a truck—military type, but without any markings. Under the muzzles of his ever-present honor guard, Stark got into the back of the truck. He was very hungry.

"Hey, wake up!"

Happy Hogan didn't move. Come in, sucker, come right in, he thought. I got somethin' for ya.

A different voice said, "Maybe he's still out."

"Hell, it's been eight hours, damn near. Think we killed him?"

"Naw. You go in, I'll cover."

"Well, watch it, huh? If ya hafta shoot, make blessed sure ya hit what ya aim at. And remember, those jacketed slugs ricochet like mad in that room there, huh?"

“Yeah, yeah, whatcha think I am, some kinda rookie? I been with AIM for five years, almost. And before that I was with Angie Martinello.”

“Yeah, sure, I know about yer big time tour with the Mafia, Freddie. Jeez, have a heart.”

Happy heard the key in the lock. Oh, both of you, come in, come *in.* Don’t one of you stay out there with a machine gun, please. The door creaked open.

“Hey, you, Hogan! Wake up, yer chow’s here.” Happy stayed motionless. He located both of the guards by their sounds. You had to know things like that sometimes, in the ring. Get hit so bad sometimes you couldn’t see, but you had to keep punching.

“C’mon, punk, wake up and—”

Happy spun in the bunk, bringing the weighted sock around in a spin, smashing it right into the face of the startled guard. Then, continuing with the movement, he hurtled the sock straight at Freddie, who stood in the corridor with a leveled machine gun.

But reaction times differ. Happy was faster. The sock struck a bar and ruptured, sending a blinding spray of wet concrete bits stringing into the face of the guard. Freddie swore, staggered back and clawed at his eyes. Then he recovered and, although blinded, brought the gun up to spray lead into the cell.

However, Happy Hogan hadn’t been standing still. He had followed the sock throw with a leap through the open cell door, and punched Freddie in the gut. Happy followed with a knockout blow to the chin and Freddie crumpled without another sound—and without firing a warning shot.

Happy checked the first guard. He was out. Happy dragged Freddie into the cell, took both their side arms and Freddie’s machine gun, and locked the cell door.

There was only one prisoner in the other five cells, and he was unconscious. Happy edged toward the door at the end of the short corridor. He heard someone say, “I’ll raise ya two bucks.” He gripped the machine gun and started through the door.

Fifteen

Modok’s gargantuan face creased into what Stark thought might be a smile. He sat strapped into his power chair atop a short, concrete pedestal in a concrete room.

“Welcome, Anthony Stark, to the secret headquarters of our organization here in exotic, romantic Costa Verde.”

Stark bowed slightly, a mocking light in his eyes. “I did not know that AIM had taken up country-grabbing as a hobby.”

“It is not a hobby, Stark, it is a vocation. AIM seeks power and what better power than to control an entire country? Or *four* countries?”

Tony Stark looked at the people assembled on either side of Modok’s thronelike dais. Five of them stood out from the hodgepodge of assembled thugs and uniformed henchmen. Three were obviously businessmen; one was an Oriental—but it was the fifth man that attracted Stark’s eyes. He was huge, a good seven feet, but magnificently proportioned, a mountain of muscle tuned to perfection. Like many men with exceptional muscularity, he went bare chested, and

stood with his arms folded to accent the bulging muscles. His gaze at Stark was hostile and arrogant.

Egotistical giant, Stark thought, but from the first look he might have a lot to be egotistical about.

“You stare at my aide, Stark,” Modok said. “He is the first of my new army.” Stark noticed a flicker of concern cross the faces of the business-suited men. “He is the prototype for the army I shall build for . . . for these gentlemen.” There was an undertone in Modok’s voice that Stark could not identify. “I shall use every technique at my command, but Randy Greiner is the first.” Modok’s lips twisted in a paroxysm that Stark thought might be a smile. “The name is appropriate, is it not? As all his abilities are increased, so is that one, that very one, which I have rejected.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Stark muttered, keeping an eye on the muscle man.

“Your impertinence is noted, Stark,” Modok said dryly. “Greiner is in charge of security here and a stern taskmaster he is. It would save you much pain and trouble to obey him.”

“While I build this army for you.”

“Yes, and you shall, never fear. An army that will overthrow the weak-kneed democratic government of Costa Verde, and replace it with a suitable government, fashioned to the needs of the times, to the realities of life.”

“To you and your friends, that is.”

“Of course, Stark, of course. I am not so hypocritical as to attempt to disguise my desires . . . and those of my companions here . . . as anything but what they are. The procurement and application of power.”

“Uh-huh,” Stark said dryly, looking at the others in the room.

“Knowledge is power, Stark, and I have that aplenty. But what is power without the use of it? It is like a muscle

unused—it withers and dies."

"Awww . . ." Stark said in mock sympathy.

Modok frowned. "I had thought perhaps you might be an individual worthy of some intellectual debate, but I see I was wrong. Rather, I was right, as all such as you are inferiors. You would rather get off a paltry quip or a rudeness than engage in anything meaningfull." Modok made a nasty sound and gestured at Greiner. "Take this intellectual midget to the gamma lab. He must begin the adaptation at once." Modok's huge, bulging eyes swung again to Stark. "You will use the Iron Man suit as a matrix, to adapt the manufacture to our plants here and elsewhere."

"Sure. Right. I don't suppose you have any unions here? Fringe benefits? Coffee machine? Junk-food truck? No, I suppose not." He sighed and put out his hands to Greiner. "Take me away, Randy baby."

The muscle man moved toward Stark without changing expression, his muscles lightly oiled. His back-handed slap sent Stark tumbling to the feet of a squad of AIM troopers. Wiping blood from his mouth, Stark rose up, wary.

"Enough," Modok said. "Take him away."

Happy Hogan looked over the sights of his machine guns and the startled guards stared back. One had a card in his hand and a pained expression. "Oh, no. And me with the first royal flush I ever even *saw,* much less drew."

"Everyone has it tough, spitball," Happy growled. "Up against the wall." They obeyed; then Happy prodded one that wore sergeant's stripes. "You, which way to the radio room?"

With the guards all safely locked away in the cell block, Happy started down the cement corridors, wearing the

sergeant’s uniform. He passed several other troopers but the head-covering AIM helmet concealed his identity.

The radio room was guarded, but they meekly surrendered under the muzzle of Happy’s machine gun. “Now,” he said to the startled operator while he kept an eye on the two guards, “get on to the SHIELD emergency frequency and send this message.”

The slugs whined off the concrete walls and splattered against the end of the corridor. Happy’s grim expression did not change as he dropped to the floor and edged the machine gun around the corner at ground level, spraying the corridor with leaden death.

“Those dudes at SHIELD better move their buns,” he muttered. “I only got one clip left.”

The helicarrier spouted flyers like a hornet’s nest. The troop carriers angled down as the helicarrier exchanged explosive rockets with the dug-in ground defenses. The fight was short, but furious. Nick Fury’s black-clad warriors were too much for the mercenaries of AIM. It was not long before Colonel Fury himself strode through the smoke-filled corridors, .45 in hand, glaring at each and every prisoner. “Hogan—where the muck are you?”

“Here,” Hogan said. Fury stepped over a few bodies, then clambered over a larger heap. He stopped, shifted his cigar butt and said, “So, what’s the score?”

“Too close,” Happy grunted. He aimed his machine gun at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. *Click.* It was an empty weapon.

“Well, you could o’ frowned at ’em or something,” Fury said. “So fill me in.”

Hogan nodded and laid out the entire deception plan to Fury, including some of Stark’s assumptions about AIM and

what they were up to. “So I think we oughta scoot that helicarrier of yers down south and blast our way right to Iron Man.”

Fury took out his cigar butt and stared at it. Behind him the cleanup crews were lifting bodies and carrying off the wounded. “Got one trouble there, Hogan,” Fury said. “It’s another country. One on good terms with the ol’ US of A. We just can’t go charging in there—shooting, especially.”

“But Iron Man is—”

“Yeah, yeah, well, he’s a volunteer, ain’t he? We can’t just send a military force into another country just like that. We aren’t even official US forces, y’know. Create one hell of a stink.”

“Fury, now dammit, this ain’t somethin’ for no blasted rule book; this is life and flippin’-A *death!”*

“I know,” Fury said. He turned abruptly and started back through the bullet-scarred corridors. “C’mon, Hogan. We gotta get on a horn to Washington and kick a few bottoms . . . and get *official* leave to make our little invasion.”

Hogan groaned. “When in hell did anyone *ask* permission to start a war?”

“Right now, in about four minutes. Maybe longer, if you spend a lotta time kissin’ ’n’ huggin’.”

“Huh?” Hogan said brightly.

“Pepper,” Fury said, aiming a thumb up at the helicarrier.

Sixteen

Stark bent over the breastplate of his armor with a pair of calipers. He took a measurement, then compared it to the plans. Surreptitiously, he stole a look from the corner of his eye at Greiner. The towering muscle man stood impassively near the door, his eyes almost always on Stark. The duplicate suit, customized to fit Greiner, was all but finished.

The inventor walked over and held up the calipers and a tape measure, his eyebrows raised. Greiner nodded curtly and Stark reached up to measure his neck at the base and up higher, near the ears. Then he took a calibration of the giant’s jawline.

“These things are customized, you know—at least for you. I suppose later, like all armies, they will he stamped out in just two sizes—too big and too small.”

Greiner never smiled. All of Stark’s attempts to ease the tension between them were failures. He didn’t want to make friends; he wanted to mislead the huge watchdog. He returned to the workbench and shielded the Iron Man

helmet from Greiner's gaze, making certain quick adjustments. He moved on down a bit and kept moving around, from suit to plans to another measurement on the big watchman. Each time he could, he did something to the helmet. Palming a small piece of printed circuitry he had altered, Stark implanted it in the helmet. It was very slow going and subject to discovery at any time.

"Happy!"

Pepper ran across the steel plating of the helicarrier's command landing deck and threw herself into Hogan's arms. The big ex-fighter patted her back and looked embarrassed.

"Hey, that's okay, hon, that's okay."

"C'mon, c'mon," Fury said impatiently. "Do all that while we're cutting through the red tape."

Stark knew something was about to happen when a guard stuck his head into the lab and whispered to Greiner. The bare-chested muscle man made a quick tour of the room and stared hard at the exposed parts of the two sets of Iron Man armor. He grunted and returned to his post.

In moments, Stark heard a hissing. The door was opened and Modok entered, floating on compressed air-jets from the bottom of his power chair.

"Stark!"

Tony turned casually, hiding the helmet from Modok's gaze with his body.

"What is it? I'm busy, Modok. I can't get anything done if you keep coming in here bothering me."

"Still impertinent. Greiner."

The seven-foot muscle man moved swiftly as Stark backed away, but the blow that sent Stark crashing into some

lockers also kept Modok from looking at the helmet too closely.

Stark got to his feet slowly. “Not so easy, is it, without your Iron Man armor?” Modok sneered.

“Yeah, I get the point. Let me go back to work. The sooner I finish, the sooner I get out of here.”

“Why, of course,” Modok said smoothly. His power chair turned on its jets and left in a flurry of dust. Greiner returned to his post and Stark wiped the blood from his cheek. He could taste it in his mouth. He picked up a pair of side cutters and went back to work.

Jasper Sitwell was fuming. “We *must* rescue Iron Man!”

“Washington says no,” Fury said. “Well, actually they are ‘taking it under advisement,’ but you know what *that* means. They’ve shelved it. They are not going to be accused of invading a country for just one man.”

“But—” Happy Hogan began.

Fury cut him off with a gesture. “Forget it, you guys! I’m sorry, but this is one mess Iron Man will have to get out of himself.”

Pepper cleared her throat. “It’s . . . it’s not Iron Man. It’s Tony . . . in Iron Man’s spare armor.”

“What?” Fury stopped and the cigar almost fell from his mouth. “What in blue blazes was Stark doing in that suit?”

Pepper looked at Hogan, who looked even more unhappy than usual. “He . . . well, uh, Iron Man wuz not available—”

“Where the blazes is he?” Fury demanded. “We need him!”

“He . . . we can’t, uh, get to him right now. So that’s why Tony did what he did.”

Nick Fury made a sound and punched a metal wall. “It doesn’t change anything. We can’t go in, not without

permission. I ain’t about to get this country in trouble . . . not even for Tony Stark!”

Pepper’s mouth went slack with dread and Happy Hogan’s face grew longer.

Seventeen

Stark waited patiently. He was tired, but he couldn’t trust himself to wake at the proper time. Timing was important. He watched the small clock in his room with weary resignation. A watched clock never moves.

But, finally, it was time. He slipped from the room and across the hall to another bedroom where two relief guards slept. Stark tiptoed across the dark room carefully. The walls of the rooms were prefabricated, fitted into a larger, concrete shell. The walls were not structural, but merely for effective division. With great care Stark unfastened a panel. If his sense of direction was right, this was a wall shared in common with the room right next to his laboratory. He need not attempt to move through guarded passages, but quite literally would go through walls.

The panel came out and he peered through. The storeroom. Stark stepped through and set the panel back in place. He moved by feel through the storeroom into the lab and felt for the switch.

Light flooded the room and Stark stepped straight toward the crimson-and-gold armor on the workbench—and stopped.

Modok stared at him with his bulging eyes and mad, mad expression. Next to him stood Greiner, looking almost happy. His eyes gleamed with anticipation. Arranged around the room were a half dozen AIM soldiers.

“You didn’t *really* think you could outsmart Modok, did you?” Modok asked. “We knew you would try to escape as soon as possible. What better way than with the Iron Man armor?”

Greiner took a step toward Stark, who appeared to cower backward, anticipating the massive blow. But he cowered against the workbench with the armor on it. “Wait, Greiner,” Modok commanded.

“You have proven a nuisance, Stark. I think we can proceed without you, don’t you? You are more trouble than you are worth.”

Greiner flexed his hands greedily. “Now, Modok? Now?”

“No, this is one pleasure I reserve for myself. Stark may be only one, shall we say, facet of Iron Man, but he is still Iron Man. I, Modok, will destroy him with a mind blast.” He turned to Stark. “A very *selective* blast, Stark. You might even appreciate my technique. I will burn away certain neural circuits, you see. You will continue to see, to feel, your heart will beat and your body will continue to function . . . but without much help from you, Stark. You will become a vegetable. I have thought about this and I believe it to be a most fitting end. From playboy to patient; from VIP to vegetable.” Modok’s laugh was nasty, booming—like a safe falling down stairs.

Stark did not wait for the laughter to cease. He spun and his hands went for the helmet. Greiner acted at once and leaped for Tony, his powerful hands reaching out.

But Tony Stark was on the move; he dropped to one knee as the seven-foot giant went crashing over him—and, in the same motion, he pulled the helmet over his head.

Modok uttered a growl like that of a lion and his mind blast seared the air to strike Iron Man's armored head. The very air crackled with raw power as the neural barrage blasted against the Shellhead.

Then Modok stopped with a short curse. Iron Man stood! Not in frozen immobility, not in pale death, but alive and moving!

Greiner came to his feet with a growl, looming over Stark as he reached for the armor on the workbench. A blow staggered Stark but he ducked under the next punch and seized a single, metallic glove. Even as he pulled it on, Stark aimed the glove at the charging Greiner. The repulsor ray struck the giant in the chest and sent him crashing back, overturning a workbench. There was a loud crash, glass broke, and bent metal shrieked.

Stark reached again for the armor and again Modok struck out with a mind blast even more powerful than before. It staggered Iron Man but did not stop him. In several swift, practiced moves Tony Stark donned the red-and-gold armor.

Iron Man was ready to fight!

"No use, Modok," Iron Man said. "I figured out the wave lengths of your mind blast and installed scrambler circuits in my helmet. Give up, Modok!"

"Never!" the monstrous head snarled. His power chair sent blasts of fire and a hail of lead against Iron Man, but the Avenger stood up under it, even if the lab didn't. In the middle of the barrage, Iron Man felt something in his head!

Modok was overloading the jury-rigged scrambler circuits by blasting everything he had at Iron Man! The Avenger knew he had to get out at once, before the hateful head found some chink, some technological flaw. He fired a

repulsor blast at the armor plans, which caught fire and burned even as he made his move.

Iron Man fired his boot-jets, and sailed right through the wall, tumbling startled AIM technicians and wrecking yet another laboratory. Iron Man flew along the corridor, braked and shot through the closed door of an elevator shaft. Three floors up he went through the floor and ceiling of the elevator car and through the roof of the secret lab itself, out into the tropical night . . . heading in the wrong direction.

"Greiner!" Modok shouted, his huge voice booming through the wrecked lab as the giant staggered to his feet. "Get into the armor!"

The muscle man shook his head to clear it after the blast from Iron Man's repulsor rays. AIM technicians hurried in at Modok's order and began putting the special armor Stark had constructed on to the bulky frame of the recovering Greiner.

"Hurry, you dolts!" Modok snarled. "Iron Man must be stopped before he can get a message out! This laboratory must not be found! It is our only base in Costa Verde!"

"Yes, master," Greiner muttered as the last of the armor was latched into position. He stood there, a foot taller than Tony Stark, a heroic statue in muscular flesh, encased in a gleaming, black version of the famed Iron Man armor.

"I've ordered radio interference on all the frequencies," Modok said. "He'll not be able to send any messages until he's out almost a hundred miles! Your boot-jets are more powerful than his—you can catch him!"

"Yes, master," Greiner said. Stark had fitted him with parts of the suit as the armor had been constructed, but he had never had it all on at once. It fitted him like a second skin, and he quickly practiced his moves—smashing a workbench with a casual blow, bending a steel bar like a wet noodle,

rising off the floor with his flaring boot-jets and turning this way and that.

“Get on with it, Greiner,” Modok snapped. “With every second, Iron Man is getting further away!”

The huge Greiner did not reply, but jetted through the lab wall and out the same punched-out hole that Iron Man had made. Up into space—it was a dizzying experience and for a moment the enormous security man was excited by the actuality of flying through the air.

“Radar has a fix on him,” Greiner muttered. Telemetry was sending a repeater pulse to his own black suit. Greiner started to turn, automatically, toward the three-hundred-mile-distant capital city of San Felipe, then stopped in midair. He stared at the tiny repeating radar image in his wrist control—Iron Man was heading *away* from San Felipe! With a fierce grin, Greiner turned back and started for Iron Man.

Eighteen

In his anxiety to get away from Modok’s probing mental fingers, Iron Man had simply *run*—away, anywhere, somewhere beyond those insistent mental blows. His jury-rigged scramblers might not hold—Stark had no way of knowing. He had made a creative guess as to the frequency of Modok’s mind blast—somewhere in the region of the alpha waves—but he could not be certain Modok could not switch. He had to get out of range; only he didn’t really know what the range might be. But the square-root law applied to all broadcast frequencies—the further away the weaker the power, to simplify it—so the further away he got, the better.

Now, in the night sky, he realised that the small, distant blur of light *behind* him was his destination. Across leagues of jungle, across swamp and mountain, this was the only place he could think of that might have a radio powerful enough, or far enough away, to punch through Modok’s interference. Iron Man banked around and headed back,

almost straight past the hidden lab and camouflaged airstrip.

Greiner smiled. The radar screen showed Iron Man turning, coming back almost in his direction. He felt the powerful thrust in his boots as his mind formed the order: full speed! It was exhilarating, flying like a rocket through the sky, cleaving the warm tropical air like a missile, heading toward The Enemy.

Greiner was confident of victory. He was bigger, stronger, more vicious than Anthony Stark, even in a suit of armor. And his own black version of that armor was even bigger and more powerful, due to the insistence of his master, the great Modok. Greiner was all muscle, but he was not stupid. He knew the value of his mission and the gratitude of Modok when he succeeded. He would, of course, succeed. No man or woman had ever bested him. Greiner had spent years studying all the martial arts. He had spent endless hours building his body to absolute perfection, constructing it as a sculptor might, bringing each muscle to its peak of size, performance and appearance. Everything in proportion, functioning fully and cooperatively. He was not "muscle-bound" as unthinking—and jealous—fools suggested. He was, he thought, the most perfect human specimen alive. Modok had even suggested the feasibility of cloning armies from his cells! *Armies* of Greiners!

The thought pleased him greatly. He would see that they ate properly, received the correct training, and became exact duplicates of himself. An *army* of perfect humans . . . in fantastically powerful armor! The thought was heady. He saw himself replacing the grotesque Modok—a genetically horrible specimen—and then, at the head of a perfect *army* of muscular Greiners.

The thought was too rich. The vistas it uncovered were too vast. He had best concentrate on the moment. That was the

way you built perfection—one muscle at a time, keeping the whole picture in focus, but concentrating on one action. And his one action now was: destroy Iron Man.

The boot-jets flared in the purple night as he sped toward the rendezvous with Iron Man.

Beep!

Beep! Beep!

Greiner heard the radar blips coming at faster and faster intervals. He was closing in. They were coming together almost head-on and at top speed.

Beep, beep, beep!

Greiner searched the night sky ahead. *There!* The twin jets of Iron Man's boots!

Beepbeepbeepbeep!

Greiner spread his armored hands, ready to rend and tear as he crashed into the unsuspecting Iron Man.

Iron Man had his eyes on the distant, faint dome of light from San Felipe, but he had not forgotten that Modok was an unusually powerful and resourceful enemy. If he were Modok, what would he do? Stop Iron Man, of course. The radio blackout was only temporary. Even Modok would know that Iron Man would fly out of any radius of static eventually. The start in the wrong direction, in his flight of fear, had been unfortunate, but it was only a modest setback in time.

What else would Modok try? Missiles? He had seen no evidence of any missile sites. The Costa Verde laboratory was keeping a low profile. Undoubtedly, bribes had been paid to workers to keep silent about the big, concrete bunker. Corrupt Costa Verde politicians had certainly been "gotten to." They looked the other way and fattened their Swiss bank accounts. But the secret base had been kept small. Somewhere Modok had a factory, or factories, ready

to begin production on the suits of armor. However, they were no threat. Without plans and prototypes, the factories were useless. He had destroyed the plans and there was only one proto—

Greiner!

The huge black armor! Of course, Modok would—

Iron Man had only a second to respond. A tiny flicker of light, twin jets of fire coming at him—Greiner!

He rolled and the black giant shot past, scraping against his own crimson-and-gold protection. Greiner's metallic glove scraped across Iron Man's thigh, grasped the other and sent him into a spin.

Iron Man was on his guard. Greiner was bigger and stronger, in a suit of armor that was even more powerful, due to its larger size—but there was a more important mission to perform than to see who was the better man. He had to get out of the zone of radio interference and alert the Costa Verde forces as to the location of the hidden revolutionary lab.

Iron Man twisted in the air and streaked for the city, squirming from the grasp of the black-armored giant. It was not cowardice, but a sense of duty, that sent the Golden Avenger flying away.

Greiner interpreted Iron Man's quick departure as fear and retreat. He smiled with a grim satisfaction as he angled his jet thrust and took off after the Avenger.

There was the faint, first light of dawn in the east but the stars were still overhead. Iron Man tried again and again to get through the heavy static, but to no avail—and Greiner was gaining on him.

Iron Man looked back just as the black-garbed Greiner caught up to him. The powerful, black fist struck at Iron Man's back, sending him tumbling through the air. For a

dizzy moment, he had difficulty regaining his balance and in that moment Greiner was upon him.

They met, two armored men in the air, boot-jets flaring, hand to hand. The selsyn motors in their complicated armor whirred as their meta-electronic muscles strained against each other. With a sense of horror, Iron Man felt the more powerful gloved hands of the bigger man crush his own hands.

Squeezed until the pain was almost unbearable, Iron Man felt his repulsor units fracture. He kicked himself free and tried to fire a repulsor blast from his right, then his left glove. Neither worked.

But Greiner's did. The first blast sent Iron Man back like a cannonball strike and the second sent him spinning through the air. Greiner, feeling more and more confident in his new armor, closed in fast, grappling with Iron Man. The Golden Avenger sent Greiner staggering back with a smashing blow to his face mask, but Modok's black-suited henchman recovered. Iron Man again tried to race toward the distant San Felipe. Every foot gained was a foot toward triumph.

However, the grimly fighting Greiner was not so easily left behind. He shot after Iron Man and once again his more powerful jets brought him abreast. The two armored men exchanged blows that would have crunched a truck and dented a tank, but the flesh within the superb armor held out.

Iron Man grappled with Greiner and tried to twist him so that their combined jets sent them toward San Felipe even faster. The giant punched free and almost took Iron Man's head off in a roundhouse swing that spun them both apart.

They closed like tigers. In the jungle below, in a lonely hut, a native awoke to the ringing sounds of metal on metal. He quavered in his rope bunk, beneath what he thought was a battle of the gods.

Smashing fists into metal again and again, the two antagonists fell lower and lower until they were threshing about in the upper branches of a giant banyan. Greiner ripped loose a thick branch and swung the wooden club against Iron Man's body. Iron Man jetted away, sweeping through the branches with a crash, Greiner in pursuit.

Greiner's gloved hand seized Iron Man's ankle and he was dragged down into the jungle. Shreds of greenery fountained skyward into the growing dawn as the two men rolled in furious combat on the jungle floor. Iron Man broke free and jumped back.

"What's the matter, big fella?" Iron Man jeered. "I'd say pick on someone your own size but the dinosaurs have all died off." His tone infuriated Greiner, who charged. Iron Man jetted straight up in a simple but deft maneuver. He was counting on Modok's hireling to be less agile in the powerful suit than he was in his familiar guise.

Greiner thundered through more jungle before he stopped; then he charged again. This time he was ready for Iron Man's evasive tactics and caught him in a bear hug. The powerful metal arms closed around Iron Man's torso and the great muscles, their natural power amplified by the armored suit, strained away at crushing the Avenger. The combatants jetted high into the sky accompanied by a scream of sundered air.

The crimson-and-gold Avenger struck at what he knew to be the suit's few weak points. It was not a smashing blow, but a small, deft maneuver. He twisted in the giant's grasp, just far enough to expose the circular disk on his metal chest. With quick, deft fingers he took out the charging wire from the seemingly decorative ring and before Modok's man could react, Iron Man had shorted out the suit's electrical system.

With a gasp of disbelief, Greiner fell away. No boot-jet flared, no repulsor ray jetted. The black-armored figure fell

toward the jungle. With every second counting, Iron Man spun in space and headed toward San Felipe, broadcasting on every emergency frequency he had.

There was a jungle stream below Greiner. It was deep, but it was swift. The black-armored form fell into it like a rock. It shook the huge man, sending paroxysms of pain through his body. He lay motionless, the suit’s protective systems shorted out. The water began to fill the suit, flowing in through the eye slits right before his horrified eyes.

Nineteen

The Costa Verde Army landed with hobnailed boots on the laboratory. Military helicopters dropped out of the sky and fast-firing .50-caliber machine guns stitched holes across the landing strip and the running AIM troopers. One chopper exploded and fell in a flaming blob; another made an abrupt crash landing almost atop the camouflaged buildings—both were victims of nerve tanglers.

Iron Man came in behind the first wave of attacking troop carriers, catching up to the strike force. He had one objective: get Modok. He hung in the air above the swarming helicopters, watching for Modok, but saw nothing. The four business-suited conspirators he saw herded from a doorway under the guns of the Costa Verde forces—but no Modok.

The jungle around them was thick and almost impenetrable. Modok could have slipped out some way. Knowing him, he always has a back door, Iron Man thought.

As he waited and watched, Iron Man tried to make repairs on his damaged repulsor-ray gloves. He managed to get one

glove fixed and had the other off and in his hands, peeled back to expose the electronic mechanism, when he caught a flicker of light from the corner of his eye.

Dawn was breaking across the lush jungle but there were parts, in lower areas, still in relative darkness. It was in one of these pockets of darkness that Iron Man saw the flare.

Modok!

Iron Man arrowed toward the flame, his mind concentrating on only one thing: get Modok. But the sudden acceleration caught the glove in his hand like a wind sock and ripped it from his inattentive hand. The glove fell through space toward the jungle and Iron Man knew he did not have time to dive down after it. Hunting for it in the thick undergrowth, in the uncertain green light of early morning, would take more time than he had. He had to go after Modok with one hand exposed and one glove with a faulty and sporadically operating repulsor.

Once he had pinpointed the fleeing power chair of the head of AIM, Iron Man put on full speed. The thought crossed his mind that he was no longer up to full power—the fight and the flight had seriously depleted his power supply. During the night fight, there had been no sun to replenish the power drain via the solar cells. Now, although the sun was rising, it would be some time before it could replenish his depleted store of energy.

Go with what you have, he thought. There is only one chance, and this is it. Win, lose, or draw, this is the final battle with Modok. The chess game was down to the end game—king to king. The pawns were gone, the powerful knights and bishops destroyed, the castle-rook under the control of the Costa Verde Army.

It was checkmate . . . or death.

Modok knew almost at once that something was in pursuit. His readout screens showed an approaching object. It was too slow to be a missile and, in any case, the Costa Verde Army did not have such devices. It was either Greiner, coming for his reward, or . . . Iron Man!

The radio interference was still in operation—Modok could not contact Greiner, if it was Greiner. But he could take no chances. If it were Greiner and he destroyed him, what had he lost? An excellent subordinate, true, but there were always others eager to hold on to his coattails in his rise to power. He would lose a suit, but that would be only a momentary loss. Duplicate plans, on microfilm, were in a side compartment of his power chair. He would simply escape to some other AIM factory, build a small army of armored henchmen, and come back—more powerful than ever.

Being the ruler of a sovereign country had its advantages. Doctor Doom knew that; even the paltry Mafia had tried it. There were so many legal aspects to it. The Russians knew it and operated extensive spy networks out of their embassies and consulates. Yes, he'd come back—to rule Costa Verde, then the other target countries. Step one in the Master Plan.

But first—remove any pursuit; erase any connection with the Costa Verde debacle. Modok programmed one of the power chair's two mini-missiles.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Targeted. Get within range, dolt.

Beep, beep, beep!

Modok's thumb pressed the red button and from the missile bay in the bowels of the chair, just above the thundering jet, a slender, pointed shape, about the length of a man's arm, shot forth.

Modok smiled. Good-bye, whoever you are.

Iron Man saw the flare of light and knew he had only seconds. The missile was undoubtedly equipped with a heat-seeking device, but machines were only machines. They could do only one or two things at a time . . . and they could be fooled—fooled by using their own strength against them.

From his equipment belt, Iron Man pulled a small thermite bomb, capable of melting through tank armor. He ignited it and threw it off to the side with a powerful pitch. The brilliant light was intensely hot and the missile instantly picked up on it . . . and followed its prime directive.

The explosion would have seared Iron Man's eyes had he been looking, but he was intent on closing the gap between himself and the fleeing Modok. Then the AIM Scientist Supreme fired another missile.

Iron Man was closer now and had even less time to react. He did not have another thermite bomb, but he did have his repulsor. He aimed his hand at the oncoming missile and commanded it to fire.

Nothing happened.

The faulty glove, injured in the fight with Greiner, malfunctioned. The missile was streaking straight toward him and Iron Man was simply not certain he could survive the blast. He might live, but be knocked unconscious, thus giving Modok time to escape. That must not happen.

With a furious mental glare Iron Man once again thought, *Fire!* The increased mental blast jumped the severed connections—and the repulsor streaked forth fire!

The missile exploded, and Iron Man flew right through the expanding cloud of fragments. They clattered off his armor but he ignored them, protecting only his exposed left hand.

Modok snarled in frustrated anger. He had no more missiles, but he did have other defenses. He activated a spurting

cloud of nerve gas. Iron Man saw the almost colorless gas only because they were flying east, into the rising sun, and it was back-lighted. He closed the eye slits automatically and the suit was sealed—except for his exposed left hand.

Remembering it at the last moment, Iron Man veered upward, jetting out of the path of the drifting blob of death.

Below, in the jungle, as the gas settled, birds and insects fell from the leaves and a lone cheetah collapsed to gasp out its last breath.

Modok had to let him get closer. The force rays, built into the arms of his power chair, were powerful weapons but were not long-distance weapons. He spun in his flight, looking back, as the bottom jet thrust him along at terrific speed. He had no worries about fuel, for the large flying chair was always kept topped off with his special fuel and he could fly almost halfway around the world. Immensely powerful batteries contained enough energy for many force-ray blasts, each several times more powerful than Iron Man's repulsor rays.

The ignorant Shellhead, Modok thought with searing anger. He attempts to conquer *Modok?* The immense head prepared to give Iron Man a double surprise—the force-ray blasts *and* a mental blast! But still the Avenger came on.

Iron Man knew that once he got close enough, Modok would attempt to mentally probe through his electronic defenses. There was no time and no equipment to do anything about that. All Iron Man could do was crowd him, force his reactions, hope Modok would make a mistake, and go for broke.

The first ethereal fingers of mental probing came but a second before the twin rays stabbed out from the arms of the power chair. The triple forces sent Iron Man veering

through the sky to escape the blasts. The force rays he mostly escaped, getting a searing sideswipe, but the mental fingers were clutching at his mind as a man clutches a bowling ball.

Out! Get out of my mind!

The fingers dug deeper, like someone digging into rotten fruit—bursting through the skin, into the soft, juicy pulp—

—No!

—NO!

Iron Man set his mind against the probe, but still the mental fingers of the villainous Modok dug in, bridged electronic gaps, sealed open the scrambler circuits, dug deeper, numbed . . . clawed . . . tore away the fragile protection . . .

Crash!

Iron Man met the power chair head-on, his eyes clenched shut in desperate protection. Neither he nor Modok had realized, in their battle of minds, that they were on a collision course. The crimson-and-gold Avenger grasped the power chair, ripping at the metal sides in an attempt to hold on, to keep contact.

Die! DIE! Modok's mind, at close range, tore into Iron Man's. Knowing he was Tony Stark gave him an edge, a place to focus, a fulcrum from which to pry. The world grew faint and fuzzy and Iron Man fought back, struggling to maintain his hold on reality.

His metal fist pummeled the chair in a futile attempt to rip it apart—but it was a powerfully built device. He only succeeded in rupturing a side compartment. A roll of microfilm tumbled out and fell spinning into the jungle below.

Die! DIE! DIE, you puerile lout! Modok's mind blasts ripped and tore at Tony Stark's mind, stripping away the electronic protection, scrambling his thoughts.

Flashes of his life flickered across Stark's mind—Professor Yinsen, giving his life so that Iron Man might exist . . . Captain America, The Avengers . . . Madame Masque . . . frozen images of beautiful women flipped past his consciousness like the pages of a magazine . . . Fury and Hogan, Pepper and—

No!

He struck out blindly, his armored hand ripping and tearing, reaching for the flesh of Modok. Iron Man's flailing feet passed through the jet stream from the chair. He hung from the flying machine by his unarmored hand, beating at the machine, grasping protuberances, and tearing.

Modok flamed his mind at Stark, relentlessly cruel. Then he noticed the unarmored hand. Instantly, he grasped the significance and since he could not reach it himself or with any of his on-board devices, he changed direction. The directional jets shifted the flying chair from an eastward horizontal flight to an almost straight-up direction. Modok's hands pulled forth an oxygen mask. He had a one-hour supply, built in to protect himself from any gases he might have to release.

Iron Man almost lost his grip as the craft changed directions. He hung on grimly, still beating on the well-built machine. Something gave; he tore off a panel and smashed his fist into the interior. There was a flash, but nothing else happened. The chair continued to rise.

Iron Man was weak and his suit was almost totally depleted of energy. He realized he was cold. The suit's climate control had failed or run out of power. He opened his eyes to look up into the glaring triumphant eyes of the leering Modok.

"Either way you lose, Iron Man. Hang on until your hand is frozen in the upper atmosphere . . . or let go and I escape." His voice was muffled by the mask, a special enormous rubber device spread across his huge head.

His hand *was* cold. Iron Man looked at it, realizing he could not feel—and his grip was slipping. He grasped the edge of the chair with his armored hand but that was within the range of the nerve tangler which Modok pulled from a compartment. The AIM chieftain aimed the grid at the hand even as he sent another mind blast at Iron Man. The Avenger yanked his hand back, out of range, but the movement caused his frozen hand to lose its grip. Iron Man fell away from the rapidly rising power chair and Modok laughed.

"Good-bye, fool!"

Iron Man sent the mental impulses to his boot-jets, hoping to catch up with the escaping villain—but nothing happened. He was falling and the air jets did not work.

He tried again and again as the jungle below grew larger and the rising power chair grew smaller. His weary mind, buffeted and confused by the close-range mental battle, sought to blast through the circuits as he had earlier with the faulty repulsor ray.

But nothing happened. He continued to fall . . . power out, a hand frozen, with only one glove and no boot-jets.

Modok watched the gold-and-red figure drop away. He would have loved to be close enough to see the great Iron Man smash into the ground. With the weight of his armor and from that height, there was no telling how far he would penetrate. It was an interesting problem in physics and mathematics, but he had no time for such games. It was getting cold. Even his built-in body heaters, set around the chair, were not enough. He must return to level flight and get away.

Modok touched the controls to change the direction—and nothing happened.

Frantically, Modok ran a status check on his complicated power chair. Plenty of power, enough for hours of flight. Fifty-nine minutes of oxygen. Full drive on the main jet. Only the controls were smashed.

Modok's massive head tried to reach over the edge. He could barely see the smashed side compartment. The microfilm of the plans was gone . . . and a bit of circuitry was hanging by a thin wire, flopping in the thinning air. The attitude-jet control mechanism! Modok's spindly arms tried to reach for it, but he was restrained by the leather-and-metal harness that held his huge head into position. Without that harness he would fall over, a grotesquely top-heavy creature with a puny body attached almost as an afterthought—just something to pump blood and manufacture enzymes.

Nevertheless, Modok undid the clamps. He had to reach over and see the damage, to repair the stupid Avenger's crude attack. And he had to do it swiftly. There was no time. The powerful main jet was carrying him into space at a fantastic speed. As the air thinned the craft rose faster and faster, beginning to escape the gravity of Earth itself.

Modok's hands fumbled at the clamps. They were only removed occasionally, one at a time, for medical reasons. But he had to release all of them to be able to bend over far enough. His fingers touched the last buckle and it felt cold in his hands. It opened. The strap fell away. Modok turned his head but he was unbalanced and he fell backward, sliding down the backrest to the left side, *away* from the damaged right side. His bulging eyes stared upward. His arms moved weakly, blindly probing at the controls built into the arms. He activated the last blast left in the force rays, but it did nothing but spin the power chair on its upward axis. He could not raise his head, he could not turn off the main jet, nor change its direction.

Modok was going straight up, straight out into space. He had fifty-six minutes of air and hours of jet fuel, but he would be frozen long before that. Out in airless space his body would burst from the interior pressure.

Modok stared upward, helpless. Already the blue of the sky had turned to dark blue, then black. He was seeing stars, as well as the unfiltered sun.

Fifty-five minutes.

Fifty-four.

He was very, very cold.

Twenty

Iron Man fell in the other direction, toward the thick jungle below. His boot-jets were useless. He tried to angle his fall as a sky diver did, to slow and control the descent, but he was still falling. The jungle was coming up with disconcerting speed. Iron Man did the only thing he could think of doing.

He headed straight down, stiffened his armored right arm and gave the mental command to his repulsor ray.

Nothing happened.

The ground was coming up *fast.*

Desperately, Iron Man sent the mental command through the helmet pickup and into the circuitry of his suit. *Fire, damn you, fire!*

At the last moment, almost at treetop level, the one repulsor fired. It was a single burst, abruptly cut off as the damaged circuitry overloaded and shorted out. The trees below him exploded into wet splinters as he plunged into the wreckage. The ripping, rending sound sent startled birds

flying. The last of the leaves and twigs fell to earth, slithering from branch to branch.

It became silent in the surprised jungle. Then a bird some distance off caa-caaed loudly. Another answered, and soon the normal jungle noises returned. Animals in flight from the explosive sounds stopped and began to eat.

There was no movement in the circle of damaged trees. In the tumble of wood and greenery there was a bit of color—red and gold. It did not move.

Nick Fury glared at the Costa Verde general. “Listen, General Villareal, you’ll send out another patrol!”

“Colonel Fury, we have been searching all day. My patrols . . .”

“Do it again.”

“My men are tired. They have fought, then transported the prisoners to the capital; they need rest.”

“No.” Fury glared hard at the general. “They’ll go out again, you hear me?”

“Colonel,” the general said, his dark eyes getting hard. “Must I remind you that you are here *only* as an observer, at the request of the United Nations. You have no legal authority here.”

“I have a *friend* here. Iron Man, somewhere out in that green stuff. He may be dead—in which case, I want the body. Or he may be dying—in which case I want to save his bum.” The one-eyed officer stood glaring at the short general and the field officer wilted.

“Of course, I respect your bonds of friendship. But your friend, he fell from so great a height . . .” The general shrugged delicately. Before Nick Fury could answer the officer held up a hand. “But we shall go again.”

“I’m going, too,” Fury said. He turned and climbed into the nearest chopper. “Get this dragonfly off the turf, *amigo.”*

The startled pilot stared, then did as he was told. The helicopters took off one by one, spreading out.

The general shrugged. Too great a height. He turned to a captain, to have a coffin ordered. They must honor the man who had saved Costa Verde. It was the least they could do. Perhaps rename a plaza as well.

"What's that?" Nick Fury said, pointing.

"A place where lightning struck, *mi coronel,"* the pilot responded.

"Go take a look, anyway," Fury said, poking a finger into the pilot's back. The Latin aviator shrugged and banked over the site.

There was a buzzing in Iron Man's ears. He struggled back from the blackness slowly. Everything hurt, it seemed. He opened his eyes and saw green. Green and black and a raw, ragged brown.

A shattered tree. And overhead, through the shattered leaves, a Costa Verde helicopter. He raised an arm, heavy without electrical power. He saw Nick Fury's face appear in the open hatch, unshaven and with the cigar butt in place, as always.

"Hey," Fury shouted over the whirlybird's noise, "that ain't no way to chop wood!"

"Ya feel okay now, boss?" Happy Hogan said. Iron Man nodded and pulled the ex-pug closer.

"What has Tony Stark been doing while Iron Man has been out of the country?"

"Inventin'. Ya know how he is." Hogan gave his employer a solemn wink. "I dug that electrostatic gizmo ya thunk up out o' the files and made like Stark had just invented it. Nobody caught on."

“Good,” Iron Man replied, getting out of his armor. Hogan opened the briefcase and the armor went neatly into it.

“No one is alive who saw Stark in the Iron Man suit?” Hogan asked. Stark nodded and began combing his hair. They were in Stark’s quarters in Stark International. The Aero Costa jet that had returned Stark and Hogan to the United States was already airborne, returning to the Central American nation.

Hogan watched his boss put on a new suit. “Ya goin’ out, boss? Ya sure this is a good thing? Maybe ya oughta take some more rest, huh?”

“Got plenty of rest on the jet, Happy. And I wouldn’t want to disappoint a lady.”

“What lady?”

“Sharman DiVono, the belly-dancing mechanic. I sent her a cablegram from San Felipe. She’ll want to hear all about the latest adventures of ol’ Shellhead.”

“She ever gonna meet him?”

Stark smiled. “Perhaps. But first, I’m going to give her a lot of opportunity to get to know Tony Stark.”

Happy Hogan almost smiled. “Pepper’ll like that.”